UNKNOWN Worlds

25c AUG · 1942
FANTASY FICTION

HELL IS FOREVER . . . . . by Alfred Bester

Hell is not where you are nor what you do. It depends not on any single thing, but on doing whatever you care to name—forever!

THE GHOST . . . . . by A. E. van Vogt

The old man was hard to stop. He'd been dead five years, but he was still seen walking around town, a kindly, gentle old man, with the absent-mindedness of the very old—which was maddening, for he had the gift of prophecy, if only he could be made to talk coherently!

THE JUMPER . . . by Theodore Sturgeon

The Canadian recognized the peculiar behavior of the Nazi war-prisoner's guard, a fantastic sort of trouble. And he was able to use it! To make the sadistic Nazi betray himself!

THE HILL AND THE HOLE . by Fritz Leiber, Jr.

Which concerns a feature of the landscape that a surveyor's instruments could not properly measure; a thing that was a hill—and also the Black Pit itself!

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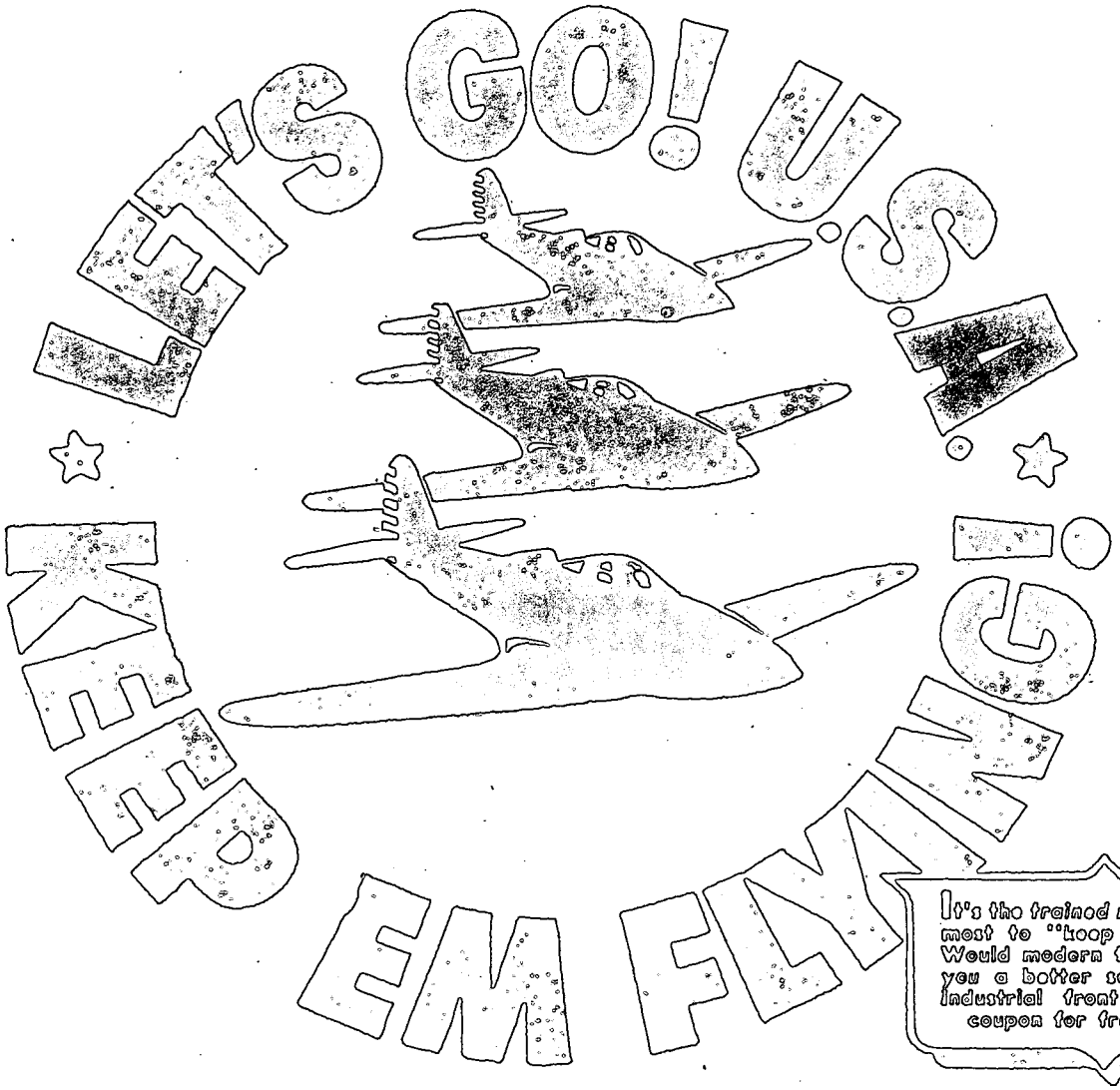

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UNKNOWN WORLDS*

Contents for August, 1942, Vol. VI, No. 2

John W. Campbell, Jr., Editor, Catherine Tarrant, Asst. Ed.

Novel

HELL IS FOREVER . . . . . Alfred Bester 8
The justice of Astoreth was unanswerable—perfectly even-handed, for each man made his own heaven or his own hell—forever!

Novelettes

THE GHOST . . . . . A. E. van Vogt 61
One of the most ingenious theories of ghosts, and one of the most ingenious stories of ghosts, that we've seen.

THOUGH POPPIES GROW . . . . . Lester del Rey 115
There are differences this time, differences of attitude as great as the differences of weapons. And who would be better able to tell those differences than—"Sam Brown"?

Short Stories

THE JUMPER . . . . . Theodore Sturgeon 46
The Nazi was plain nasty—and victim of a strange condition the Canadian recognized and used to make that prison guard call down the R. A. F.!

EVERYTHING'S JAKE . . . . . John Hawkins 54
He wanted to be a writer, and wasn't so good at it. He had a pixie, though, that made him a first-class prophet—

THE HILL AND THE HOLE . . . . . Fritz Leiber, Jr. 78
The little girl said it was a hole; the surveyor could see it was a hill—at first. Then—unpleasantly—discovered it *was* a hole—

FIGHTERS NEVER QUIT . . . . . Malcolm Jameson 84
Even when they were sunk, killed, they saw no reason to let that interfere with their fighting work—

THE WISDOM OF THE EAST . . . . . L. Sprague de Camp 90
Wise, no doubt. But just a little whacky beyond any question.

STEP INTO MY GARDEN . . . . . Frank Belknap Long 98
A strange sort of garden—with very curious pests, and an even stranger gardener to tend its death-blooms!

THE BARGAIN . . . . . Cleve Cartmill 107
Immortality—curse or blessing? Is the question capable of a general answer, or must each individual have an individual answer?

A Poem

SINE PACE . . . . . Edith Borden Greer 130

Readers' Department

OF THINGS BEYOND 6

Illustrations by: Cartier, M. Isip, Kolliker, Kramer and Orban

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16

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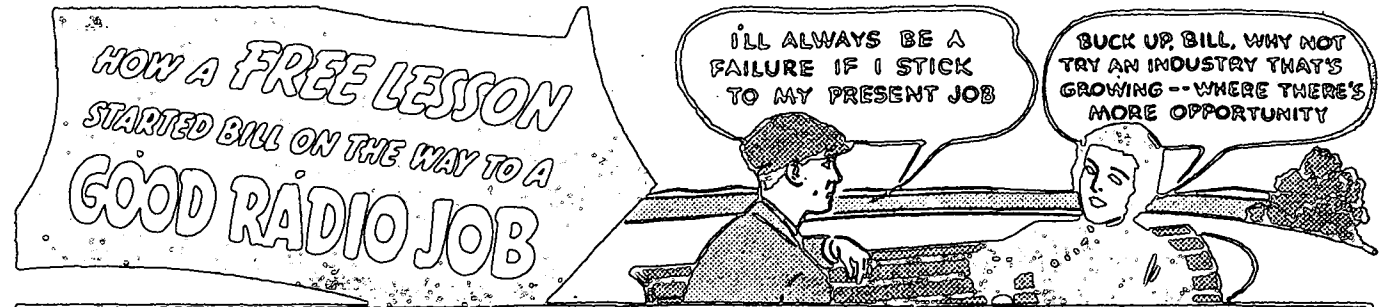
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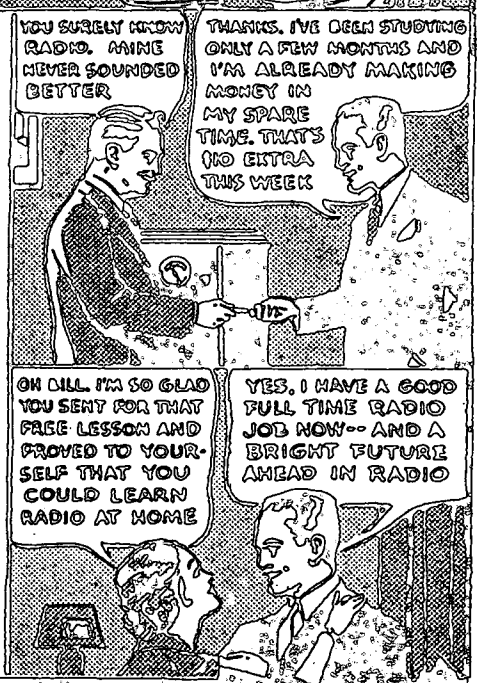
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OF THINGS BEYOND

Of all the beings of fantasy and mythology, there are very, very few indeed that were, by the legends, beneficial and friendly to man generally. Man's lot—particularly the lot of the common man in the ages when myths got started—was not exactly happy so he needed a whole world of inimical mythological beings to put some spice in it; one would think they would have had a few more tales of helpful, purely beneficial beings.

Fairies are perhaps the outstanding exceptions to the general run of woe, misery and evil spellbinders. Yet even those gentle beings were divided into good and bad groups, and the best of the good ones displayed an extremely touchy temper combined with an unlimited imagination for making life unpleasant. Brownies were helpful little fellows, of course—a fact almost invariably discovered after the helpful little man had been offended to a point that led him to curse, vex and generally ruin the mortal who had failed to recognize him. The result is that nearly all the tales of brownies reveal these magic workers being distinctly unhelpful; the tale of their helpfulness is generally, it would seem, reserved to make life the more miserable by reason of the golden opportunity missed.

Aside from the fairies and the brownies, mythology is populated almost exclusively with pestiferous to deadly dangerous creations. The pixie on one end, the vampire, werewolf and ghoul on the other.

But the real root of the malignancy of the other-worlders probably lay in the actual, but not apparent, complexity of the law of cause and effect. The fact that causes do produce effects is pretty evident to even the lowest forms of animal life. Man learned the existence of the law soon enough; you stick a spear in a deer, the deer stops running away, you have a meal. You plant grain seed, the seed produces more grain. You swing an ax at a tree, the tree is cut, it falls, and you have a fire.

Very simple—all very clear. But sometimes when the ax was swung at the tree, instead of cutting it, the ax blade turned, bounced and cut the leg of the axman. The tough, elastic—but unseen—knot that turned the ax blade isn't blamed; obviously a dryad is protecting the tree, or the axman has offended a brownie, a fairy or is just the victim of a pixie.

The other-worlders were invented primarily to fill in the gaps where the apparent simplicity of cause and effect broke down; since such breakdowns were almost invariably to man's distinct and painful disadvantage, it was obvious that the other-worlders, were, on the whole, thoroughly unpleasant folk to have around.

The deadly beings of mythology—the vampire and werewolf types—probably came from other sources. That wolves can display a nearly human ingenuity in attack and in self-defense is certain enough. In the day of highly uncertain firearms, and when the ordinary countryman couldn't handle a bow and arrow with any dead-shot accuracy, many a wolf must have been "shot through and through" in uncertain twilight or moonlight and yet run on unscathed. Add this to the psychopathic condition wherein the insane sometimes are convinced they are, or can change into, various animals and the werewolf legend has plenty of basis.

In pernicious anæmia, the victim dies quite evidently from a loss of blood. Gradually he becomes paler and paler, weak and exhausted at the slightest effort. Each night something invisibly steals more of his blood; each day the victim arises weaker till, finally, the bloodless victim dies. No matter how careful the defense, no matter what watchers attempt to do, the unseen blood-stealer completes his deadly raid.

But the modern medical man knows that while garlic won't hold off the "vampire," fresh liver, liver extracts and copper-bearing foods will. The unseen blood thief is within the body, not outside. But with only the effect detectable, the cause was assigned, as ever, to the unseen, malign beings of the other world.

Mythology always has been rooted in the law of cause and effect—where the effect can be seen, but the cause is multiple, or beyond the understanding of the people of the time.

As we learn more of the causes of strange effects, however, an inverse mythology tends to spring up, one as confining, as mentally limiting in its own way, as the old mythology was. That's the mythology of science and knowledge, the mythology—which no scientist who deserves the name accepts—that science can explain everything, and consequently, if science can't explain it, it doesn't exist.

Why, Lord, they haven't explained gravity yet! They can describe it and its properties, certainly. But the Slovens of central Europe described most of the properties of pernicious anæmia pretty accurately. They assigned the wrong cause to it, but they had the properties down pat.

The Editor.

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Ellery Queen is one of the famous names in radio.

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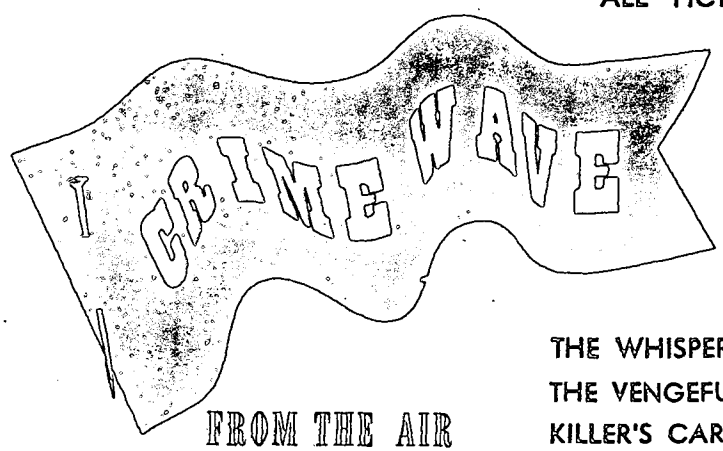

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tillado, Beaune, Kirschwasser, Bordeaux, Hock, Burgundy, Medoc and Chambertin; whiskey, Scotch, Irish, Usquebaugh and Schnapps; brandy, gin and rum. They drank them separately and together; they mixed the tart alcohols and flavors into stupendous punches, into a thousand symphonies of taste; they experimented, created, invented, destroyed—and finally they were bored.

Drugs followed. The milder first, then the more potent. Crisp brown licoricelike opium, toasted and rolled into pellets for smoking in long ivory pipes; thick green absinthe sipped bitter and strong, without sugar or water; heroin and cocaine in rustling snow crystals; marijuana rolled loosely in brown-paper cigarettes; hashish in milk-white curds to be eaten or tarry plugs of Bhang that were chewed and stained the lips deep tan—and again they were bored.

Their search for sensation became frantic with so much of their senses already dissipated. They enlarged their parties and turned them into festivals of horror. Exotic dancers and esoteric half-human creatures crowded the broad low room and filled it with their incredible performances. Pain, fear, desire, love and hatred were torn apart and exhibited to the least quivering detail like so many laboratory specimens.

The cloying odor of perfume mingled with the knife-sharp sweat of excited bodies; the anguished screams of tortured creatures merely interrupted their swift, never-ceasing talk—and so in time this, too, palled. They reduced their parties to the original six and returned each week to sit, bored and still hungry for new sensations. Now, languidly and without enthusiasm, they were toying with the occult; turning the party room into a necromancer's studio.

Offhand you would not have thought it was a bomb shelter. The room was large and square, the walls paneled with imitation-grained soundproofing, the ceiling low-beamed. To the right was an inset door, heavy and bolted with an enormous wrought-iron lock. There were no windows, but the air-conditioning inlets were shaped like the arched slits of a Gothic monastery. Lady Sutton had paned them with stained glass and set small electric bulbs behind them. They threw showers of sullen color across the room.

The flooring was of ancient walnut, high polished and gleaming like metal. Across it were spread a score of lustrous Oriental scatter rugs. One enormous divan, covered with Indian Batik, ran the width of the shelter against a wall. Above, were tiers of book shelves, and before it was a long trestle table piled with banquet remains. The rest of the shelter was furnished with deep, seductive chairs, soft, quilted and inviting.

Centuries ago this had been the deepest dungeon of Sutton Castle, hundreds of feet beneath the earth. Now—drained, warmed, air-conditioned and refurnished, it was the scene of Lady Sutton's sensation parties. More—it was the official meeting place of the Society of Six. The Six Decadents, they called themselves.

"We are the last spiritual descendants of Nero—the last of the gloriously evil aristocrats," Lady Sutton would say. "We were born centuries too late, my friends. In a world that is no longer ours we have nothing to live for but ourselves. We are a race apart—we six."

And when unprecedented bombings shook England so catastrophically that the shudders even penetrated to the Sutton shelter, she would glance up and laugh: "Let them slaughter each other, those pigs.—This is no war of ours. We go our own way, always, eh? Think, my friends, what a joy it would be to emerge from our shelter one bright morning and find all London dead—all the world dead—" And then she laughed again with her deep hoarse bellow.

She was bellowing now, her enormous fat body sprawled half across the divan like a decorated toad, laughing at the program that Digby Finchley had just handed her. It had been etched by Finchley himself—an exquisite design of devils and angels in grotesque amorous combat encircling the cabalistic lettering that read:

THE SIX PRESENT
ASTAROTH WAS A LADY
By Christian Braugh
Cast:
(In order of appearance)

A Necromancer.....Christian Braugh
A Black Cat.....Merlin
(By courtesy of Lady Sutton)
Astaroth.....Theone Dubedat
Nebiros, an Assistant Demon.....Digby Finchley
Costumes.....Digby Finchley
Special Effects.....Robert Peel
Music.....Sidra Peel

Finchley said: "A little comedy *is* a change, isn't it?"

Lady Sutton shuddered with uncontrolled laughter. "Astaroth was a lady! Are you sure you wrote it, Chris?"

There was no answer from Braugh, only the buzz of preparations from the far end of the room, where a small stage had been erected and curtained off.

She bellowed in her broken bass: "Hey, Chris! Hey, there—"

The curtain split and Christian Braugh thrust his albino head through. His face was partially made up with red eyebrows and beard and dark-blue shadows around the eyes. He said: "Beg pardon, Lady Sutton?"

At the sight of his face she rolled over the divan

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like a mountain of jelly. Across her helpless body, Finchley smiled to Braugh, his lips unfolding in a cat's grin. Braugh moved his white head in imperceptible answer.

"I said, did you really write this, Chris . . . or have you hired a ghost again?"

Braugh looked angry, then suddenly disappeared behind the curtain.

"Oh my hat!" gurgled Lady Sutton. "This is better than a gallon of champagne. And, speaking of same . . . who's nearest the bubbly? Bob? Pour some more. Bob! Bob Peel!"

The man slumped in the chair alongside the ice buckets never moved. He was lying on the nape of his neck, feet thrust out in a V before him, his dress shirt buckled under his bearded chin. Finchley went across the room and looked down at him.

"Passed out," he said.

"So early? Well, no matter. Fetch me a glass, Dig, there's a good lad."

Finchley filled a prismed champagne glass and brought it to Lady Sutton. From a small, cameo-faced vial she added three drops of laudanum, swirled the sparkling mixture once and then sipped while she read the program.

"A Necromancer . . . that's you, eh, Dig?"

He nodded.

"And what's a Necromancer?"

"A kind of magician, Lady Sutton."

"Magician? Oh, that's good . . . that's very good!" She spilled champagne on her vast, blotchy bosom and dabbed ineffectually with the program.

Finchley lifted a hand to restrain her and said: "You ought to be careful with that program, Lady Sutton. I made only one print and then destroyed the plate. It's unique and liable to be valuable."

"Collector's item, eh? Your work, of course, Dig?"

"Yes."

"Not much of a change from the usual pornography, hey?" She burst into another thunder of laughter that degenerated into a fit of hacking coughs. She dropped the glass altogether. Finchley flushed, then retrieved the glass and returned it to the buffet, stepping carefully over Peel's legs. "And who's this Astaroth?" Lady Sutton went on.

From behind the curtain, Theone Dubedat called: "Me! I! *Ich! Moi!*" Her voice was husky. It had a quality of gray smoke.

"Darling, I know it's you, but *what* are you?"

"A devil, I think."

Finchley said: "Astaroth is some sort of legendary archdemon—a top-ranking devil, so to speak."

"Theone a devil? No doubt of it—" Exhausted with rapture, Lady Sutton lay quiescent and musing on the patterned divan. At last she raised an enormous arm and examined her watch. The flesh hung from her elbows in elephantine creases, and at the gesture it shook and a little shower of torn sequins glittered down from her sleeve.

"You'd best get on with it, Dig. I've got to leave at midnight."

"Leave?"

"You heard me."

Finchley's face contorted. He bent over her, tense with suppressed emotion, his bleak eyes examining her. "What's up? What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Then—"

"A few things have changed, that's all."

"What's changed?"

Her face turned harsh as she returned his stare. The bulging features seemed to stiffen into obsidian. "Too soon to tell you . . . but you'll find out quick enough. Now I don't want any more pestering from you, Dig, m'lad!"

Finchley's scarecrow features regained some measure of control. He started to speak, but before he could utter a word Sidra Peel suddenly popped her head out of the alcove alongside the stage, where the organ had been placed. She called: "Ro-bert!"

In a constricted voice Finchley said: "Bob's passed out again, Sidra."

She emerged from the alcove, walked jerkily across the room and stood looking down in her husband's face. Sidra Peel was short, slender and dark. Her body was like an electric high-tension wire, alive with too much current, yet coruscated, stained and rusted from too much exposure to passion. The deep black sockets of her eyes were frigid coals with gleaming white points. As she gazed at her husband, her long fingers writhed; then, suddenly, her hand lashed out and struck the inert face.

"Swine!" she hissed.

Lady Sutton laughed and coughed all at once. Sidra Peel shot her a venomous glance and stepped toward the divan, the sharp crack of her heel on the walnut sounding like a pistol shot. Finchley gestured a quick warning that stopped her. She hesitated, then returned to the alcove and said: "The music's ready."

"And so am I," said Lady Sutton. "On with the show and all that, eh?" She spread herself across the divan like a crawling tumor the while Finchley propped scarlet pillows under her head. "It's really nice of you to play this little comedy for me, Dig. Too bad there're only six of us here tonight. Ought to have an audience, eh?"

"You're the only audience we want, Lady Sutton."

"Ah! Keep it all in the family?"

"So to speak."

"The Six—Happy Family of Hatred."

"That's not so, Lady Sutton."

"Don't be an ass, Dig. We're all hateful. We

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glory in it. I ought to know. I'm the Bookkeeper of Disgust. Some day I'll let you all see the entries. Some day soon."

"What sort of entries?"

"Curious already, eh? Oh, nothing spectacular. Just the way Sidra's been trying to kill her husband—and Bob's been torturing her by holding on. And you making a fortune out of filthy pictures and eating your rotten heart out for that frigid devil, Theone—"

"Please, Lady Sutton!"

"And Theone," she went on with relish, "using that icy body of hers like an executioner's scalpel to torture and . . . and Chris . . . How many of his books d'you think he's stolen from those poor Grub Street devils?"

"I couldn't say."

"I know. All of them. A fortune on other men's brains. Oh, we're a beautifully loathsome lot, Dig. It's the only thing we have to be proud of—the only thing that sets us off from the billion blundering moralistic idiots that have inherited our earth. That's why we've got to stay a happy family of mutual hatred."

"I should call it mutual admiration," Finchley murmured. He bowed courteously and went to the curtains, looking more like a scarecrow than ever in the black dinner clothes. He was extremely tall—three inches over six feet—and extremely thin. The pipestem arms and legs looked like warped dowel sticks, and his horsy flat features seemed to have been painted on a pasty pillow.

Finchley pulled the curtains together behind him. A moment after he disappeared there was a whispered cue and the lights dimmed. In the vast low room there was no sound except Lady Sutton's croupy breathing. Peel, still slumped in his deep chair, was motionless and invisible except for the limp angle of his legs.

From infinite distances came a slight vibration—almost a shudder. It seemed at first to be a sinister reminder of the hell that was bursting across England, hundreds of feet over their heads. Then the shuddering quickened and by imperceptible stages swelled into the deepest tones of the organ. Above the background of the throbbing diapasons, a weird tremolo of fourths, empty and spine-chilling, cascaded down the keyboard in chromatic steps.

Lady Sutton chuckled faintly. "My word," she said, "that's really horrid, Sidra. Ghastly."

The grim background of music choked her. It filled the shelter with chilling tendrils of sound that were more moan than tone. The curtains slipped apart slowly, revealing Christian Braugh garbed in black, his face a hideous, twisted mass of red and purple-blue that contrasted starkly to the near-albino white hair. Braugh stood at the center of the stage surrounded by spider-legged tables piled high with Necromancer's apparatus. Prominent was Merlin, Lady Sutton's black cat, majestically poised atop an iron-bound volume.

Braugh lifted a piece of black chalk from a table and drew a circle on the floor twelve feet around himself. He inscribed the circumference with cabalistic characters and pentacles. Then he lifted a wafer and exhibited it with a flirt of his wrist.

"This," he declaimed in sepulchral tones, "is a sacred wafer stolen from a church at midnight."

Lady Sutton applauded satirically, but stopped almost at once. The music seemed to upset her. She moved uneasily on the divan and looked about her with little uncertain glances.

Muttering blasphemous imprecations, Braugh raised an iron dagger and plunged it through the center of the wafer. Then he arranged a copper chafing dish over a blue alcohol flame and began to stir in powders and crystals of bright colors. He lifted a crystal vial filled with purple liquid and poured the contents into a porcelain bowl. There was a faint detonation and a thick cloud of vapor lifted to the ceiling.

The organ surged. Braugh muttered incantations under his breath and performed oddly suggestive gestures. The shelter swam with scents and mists, violet clouds and deep fogs. Lady Sutton glanced toward the chair across from her. "Splendid, Bob," she called. "Wonderful effects—really." She tried to make her voice cheerful, but it came out in a sickly croak. Peel never moved.

With a savage motion, Braugh pulled three black hairs from the cat's tail. Merlin uttered a yowl of rage, and sprang at the same time from the table to the top of an inlaid cabinet in the background. Through the mists and vapors his giant yellow eyes gleamed balefully. The hairs went into the chafing dish and a new aroma filled the room. In quick succession the claws of an owl, the powder of vipers, and a human-shaped mandrake root followed.

"Now!" cried Braugh.

He cast the wafer, transfixed by the dagger, into the porcelain bowl containing the purple fluid, and then poured the whole mixture into the copper chafing dish.

There was a violent explosion.

A jet-black cloud infolded the stage and swirled out into the shelter. Slowly it cleared away, faintly revealing the tall form of a naked devil; the body exquisitely formed, the head a frightful mask. Braugh had disappeared.

Through the drifting clouds, in the husky tones of Theone Dubedat, the devil spoke: "Greetings, Lady Sutton—"

She stepped forward out of the vapor. In the pulsating light that shot down to the stage her

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body shone with a shimmering nacreous glow of its own. The toes and fingers were long and graceful. Color slashed across the rounded torso. Yet that whole perfect body was cold and lifeless—as unreal as the grotesque papier-mâché that covered her head.

Theone repeated: "Greetings—"

"Hi, old thing!" Lady Sutton interrupted. "How's everything in hell?"

There was a giggle from the alcove where Sidra Peel was playing softly. Theone posed statuesquely and lifted her head a little higher to speak. "I bring you—"

"Darling!" shrieked Lady Sutton, "why didn't you let me know it was going to be like this. I'd have sold tickets!"

Theone raised a gleaming arm imperiously. Again she began: "I bring you the thanks of the five who—" And then abruptly she stopped.

For the space of five heartbeats there was a gasping pause while the organ murmured and the last of the black smoke filtered away, mushrooming against the ceiling. In the silence Theone's rapid, choked breathing mounted hysterically—then came a ghastly, piercing scream.

The others darted from behind the stage, exclaiming in astonishment—Braugh, Necromancer's costume thrown over his arm, his make-up removed; Finchley like a pair of animated scissors in black habit and cowl, a script in his hand. The organ stuttered, then stopped with a crash, and Sidra Peel burst out of the alcove.

Theone tried to scream again, but her voice caught and broke. In the appalled silence Lady Sutton cried: "What is it? Something wrong?"

Theone uttered a moaning sound and pointed to the center of the stage. "Look— There—"

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The words came off the top of her throat like the squeal of nails on slate. She cowered back against a table upsetting the apparatus. It clashed and tinkled.

"What is it? For the love of—"

"It worked—" Theone moaned. "The r-ritual—It worked!"

They stared through the gloom, then started. An enormous sable Thing was slowly rising in the center of the Necromancer's circle—a vague, morphous form towering high, emitting a dull, hissing sound like the whisper of a caldron.

"Who is that?" Lady Sutton shouted.

The Thing pushed forward like some sickly extrusion. When it reached the edge of the black circle it halted. The seething sound swelled ominously.

"Is it one of us?" Lady Sutton cried. "Is this a stupid trick? Finchley . . . Braugh—"

They shot her startled glances, bleak with terror.

"Sidra . . . Robert . . . Theone . . . No, you're all here. Then who is that? How did it get in here?"

"It's impossible," Braugh whispered, backing away. His legs knocked against the edge of the divan and he sprawled clumsily.

Lady Sutton beat at him with helpless hands and cried: "Do something! Do something—"

Finchley tried to control his voice. He stuttered: "W-we're safe so long as the circle isn't broken. It can't get out—"

On the stage, Theone was sobbing, making pushing motions with her hands. Suddenly she crumpled to the floor. One outflung arm rubbed away a segment of the black chalk circle. The Thing moved swiftly, stepped through the break in the circle and descended from the platform like a black fluid. Finchley and Sidra Peel reeled back with terrified shrieks. There was a growing thickness pervading the shelter atmosphere. Little gusts of vapor twisted around the head of the Thing as it moved slowly toward the divan.

"You're all joking!" Lady Sutton screamed. "This isn't real. It can't be!" She heaved up from the divan and tottered to her feet. Her face blanched as she counted the tale of her guests again. One—two—and four made six—and the shape made seven. But there should only be six—

She backed away, then began to run. The Thing was following her when she reached the door. Lady Sutton pulled at the door handle, but the iron bolt was locked. Quickly, for all her vast bulk, she ran around the edge of the shelter, smashing over the tables. As the Thing expanded in the darkness and filled the room with its sibilant hissing, she snatched at her purse and tore it open, groping for the key. Her shaking hands scattered the purse contents over the room.

A deep bellow pierced the blackness. Lady Sutton jerked and stared around desperately, making little animal noises. As the Thing threatened to engulf her in its infinite black depths, a cry tore up through her body and she sank heavily to the floor.

Silence.

Smoke drifted in shaded clouds.

The china clock ticked off a sequence of delicate periods.

"Well—" Finchley said in conversational tones. "That's that."

He went to the inert figure on the floor. He knelt over it for a moment, probing and testing, his face flickering with savage hunger. Then he looked up and grinned. "She's dead, all right. Just the way we figured. Heart failure. She was too fat."

He remained on his knees, drinking in the moment of death. The others clustered around the toadlike body, staring with distended nostrils. The moment hardly lasted, then the languor of infinite boredom again shaded across their features.

The black Thing waved its arms a few times. The costume split at last to reveal a complicated framework and the sweating, bearded face of Robert Peel. He dropped the costume around him, stepped out of it, and went to the figure in the chair.

"The dummy idea was perfect," he said. His bright little eyes glittered momentarily. He looked like a sadistic miniature of Edward VII. "She'd never have believed it if we hadn't arranged for a seventh unknown to enter the scene." He glanced at his wife. "That slap was a stroke of genius, Sidra. Wonderful realism—"

"I meant it."

"I know you did, dearly beloved, but thanks nevertheless."

Theone Dubedat had risen and gotten into a white dressing gown. She stepped down and walked over to the body, removing the hideous devil's mask. It revealed a beautifully chiseled face, frigid and lovely. Her blond hair gleamed in the darkness.

Braugh said: "Your acting was superb, Theone—" He bobbed his white albino head appreciatively.

For a time she didn't answer. She stood staring down at the shapeless mound of flesh, an expression of hopeless longing on her face; but there was nothing more to her gazing than the impersonal curiosity of a bystander watching a window chef. Less.

At last Theone sighed. She said: "So it wasn't worth it, after all."

"What?" Braugh groped for a cigarette.

"The acting—the whole performance. We've been let down again, Chris."

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Braugh scratched a match. The orange flame flared, flickering across their disappointed faces. He lit his cigarette, then held the flame high and looked at them. The illumination twisted their features into caricatures, emphasizing their weariness, their infinite boredom. Braugh said: My-my—"

"It's no use, Chris. This whole murder was a bust. It was about as exciting as a glass of water."

Finchley hunched his shoulders and paced up and back of the shelter like a bundle of stilts. He said: "I got a bit of a kick when I thought she suspected. It didn't last long, though."

"You ought to be grateful for even that."

"I am."

Peel clucked his tongue in exasperation, then knelt like a bearded humpty-dumpty, his bald head gleaming, and raked in the contents of Lady Sutton's scattered purse. The banknotes he folded and put in his pocket. He took the fat dead hand and lifted it slightly toward Theone. "You always admired her sapphire, Theone. Want it?"

"You couldn't get it off, Bob."

"I think I could," he said, pulling strenuously.

"Oh, to hell with the sapphire."

"No—it's coming."

The ring slipped forward, then caught in the folds of flesh at the knuckle. Peel took a fresh grip and tugged and twisted. There was a sucking, yielding sound and the entire finger tore away from the hand. The dull odor of putrefaction struck their nostrils as they looked on with vague curiosity.

Peel shrugged and dropped the finger. He arose, dusting his hands slightly. "She rots fast," he said. "Peculiar—"

Braugh wrinkled his nose and said: "She was too fat."

Theone turned away in sudden frantic desperation, her hands clasping her elbows. "What are we to do?" she cried. "What? Isn't there a sensation left on earth we haven't tried?"

With a dry whir the china clock began quick chimes. Midnight.

Finchley said: "We might go back to drugs."

"They're as futile as this paltry murder."

"But there are other sensations. New ones."

"Name one!" Theone said in exasperation. "Only one!"

"I could name several—if you'll have a seat and permit me—"

Suddenly Theone interrupted: "That's you speaking, isn't it, Dig?"

In a peculiar voice Finchley answered: "N-no. I thought it was Chris."

Braugh said: "Wasn't me."

"You, Bob?"

"No."

"Th-then—"

The small voice said: "If the ladies and gentlemen would be kind enough to—"

It came from the stage. There was something there—something that spoke in that quiet, gentle voice; for Merlin was stalking back and forth, arching his high black back against an invisible leg.

"—to sit down," the voice continued persuasively.

Braugh had the most courage. He moved to the stage with slow, steady steps, the cigarette hanging firmly from his lips. He leaned across the apron and peered. For a while his eyes examined the stage, then he let a spume of smoke jet from his nostrils and called: "There's nothing here."

And at that moment the blue smoke swirled under the lights and swept around a figure of emptiness. It was no more than a glimpse of an outline—of a negative, but it was enough to make Braugh cry out and leap back. The others turned sick, too, and staggered to chairs.

"So sorry," said the quiet voice. "It won't happen again."

Peel gathered himself and said: "Merely for the sake of—"

"Yes?"

He tried to freeze his jerking features. "Merely for the sake of s-scientific curiosity it—"

"Calm yourself, my friend."

"The ritual . . . it did w-work?"

"Of course not. My friends, there is no need to call us with such fantastic ceremony. If you really want us, we come."

"And you?"

"I? Oh . . . I know you have been thinking of me for some time. Tonight you wanted me—really wanted me, and I came."

The last of the cigarette smoke convulsed violently as that terrible figure of emptiness seemed to stoop and at last seat itself casually at the edge of the stage. The cat hesitated and then began rolling its head with little mews of pleasure as something fondled it.

Still striving desperately to control himself, Peel said: "But all those ceremonies and rituals that have been handed down—"

"Merely symbolic, Mr. Peel." Peel started at the sound of his name. "You have read, no doubt, that we do not appear unless a certain ritual is performed, and only if it is letter-perfect. That is not true, of course. We appear if the invitation is sincere—and only then—with or without ceremony."

Sick and verging on hysteria, Sidra whispered: "I'm getting out of here." She tried to rise.

The gentle voice said: "One moment, please—"

"No!"

"I will help you get rid of your husband, Mrs. Peel."

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Sidra blinked, then sank back into her chair. Peel clenched his fists and opened his mouth to speak. Before he could begin, the gentle voice continued: "And yet you will not lose your wife, if you really want to keep her, Mr. Peel. I guarantee that."

The cat was suddenly lifted into the air and then settled comfortably in space a few feet from the floor. They could see the thick fur on the back smooth and resmooth from the gentle petting.

At length Braugh asked: "What do you offer us?"

"I offer each of you his own heart's desire."

"And that is?"

"A new sensation—all new sensations—"

"What new sensation?"

"The sensation of reality."

Braugh laughed. "Hardly anyone's heart's desire."

"This will be, for I offer you five different realities—realities which you may fashion, each for himself. I offer you worlds of your own making wherein Mrs. Peel may happily murder her husband in hers—and yet Mr. Peel may keep his wife in his own. To Mr. Braugh I offer the dream-world of the writer, and to Mr. Finchley the creation of the artist—"

Theone said: "Those are dreams, and dreams are cheap. We all possess them."

"But you all awaken from your dreams and you pay the bitter price of that realization. I offer you an awakening from the present into a future reality which you may shape to your own desires—a reality which will never end."

Peel said: "Five simultaneous realities is a contradiction in terms. It's a paradox—impossible."

"Then I offer you the impossible."

"And the price?"

"I beg pardon?"

"The price," Peel repeated with growing courage. "We're not altogether naïve. We know there's always a price."

There was a long pause, then the voice said reproachfully: "I'm afraid there are many misconceptions and many things you fail to understand. Just now I cannot explain, but believe me when I say there is no price."

"Ridiculous. Nothing is ever given for nothing."

"Very well, Mr. Peel, if we must use the terminology of the market place, let me say that we never appear unless the price for our service is paid in advance. Yours has already been paid."

"Paid?" They shot involuntary glances at the rotting body on the shelter floor.

"In full."

"Then?"

"You're willing, I see. Very well—"

The cat was again lifted high in the air and deposited on the floor with a last gentle pat. The remnants of mist clinging to the shelter ceiling weaved and churned as the invisible donor advanced. Instinctively the five arose and waited, tense and fearful, yet with a mounting sense of fulfillment.

A key darted up from the floor and sailed through midair toward the door. It paused before the lock an instant, then inserted itself and turned. The heavy wrought-iron bolt lifted and the door swung wide. Beyond should have been the dungeon passage leading to the upper levels of Sutton Castle—a low, narrow corridor, paved with flags and lined with limestone blocks. Now, a few inches beyond the door jamb, there hung a veil of flame.

Pale, incredibly beautiful, it was a tapestry of flickering fire, the warp and weft an intermesh of rainbow colors. Those pastel strands of color locked and interlocked, swam, threaded and spun like so many individual life lines. They were an infinity of beads, emotions, the silken countenance of time, the swirling skin of space— They were all things to all men, and above all else, they were beautiful.

"For you," that quiet voice said, "your old reality ends in this room—"

"As simply as this?"

"Quite."

"But—"

"Here you stand," interrupted the voice, "in the last kernel, the last nucleus so to speak, of what once was real for you. Pass the door—pass through the veil, and you enter the reality I promised."

"What will we find beyond the veil?"

"What each of you desires. Nothing lies beyond that veil now. There is nothing there—nothing but time and space waiting for the molding. There is nothing and the potential of everything."

Peel, in a low voice, said: "One time and one space? Will that be enough for all different realities?"

"All time, all space, my friend," the quiet voice answered. "Pass through and you will find the matrix of dreams."

They had been clustered together, standing close to each other in a kind of strained companionship. Now, in the silence that followed, they separated slightly as though each had marked out for himself a reality all his own—a life entirely divorced from the past and the companions of old times. It was a gesture of utter isolation.

Mutually impulsed, yet independently motivated, they moved toward the glittering veil—

II.

I am an artist, Digby Finchley thought, and an artist is a creator. To create is to be godlike, and

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so shall I be. I shall be god of my world, and from nothing I shall create all—and my all will be beauty.

He was the first to reach the veil and the first to pass through. Across his face the riot of color flicked like a cool spray. He blinked his eyes momentarily as the brilliant scarlets and purples blinded him. When he opened them again he had left the veil a step behind and stood in the darkness.

But not darkness.

It was the blank jet-black of infinite emptiness. It smote his eyes like a heavy hand and seemed to press the eyeballs back into his skull like leaden weights. He was terrified and jerked his head about, staring into the impenetrable nothingness, mistaking the ephemeral flashes of retinal light for reality.

Nor was he standing.

For he took one hasty stride and it was as though he were suspended out of all contact with mass and matter. His terror was tinged with horror as he became aware that he was utterly alone; that there was nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to touch. A bitter loneliness assailed him and in that instant he understood how truthfully the voice in the shelter had spoken, and how terribly real his new reality was.

That instant, too, was his salvation. "For," Finchley murmured with a wry smile to the blankness, "it is of the essence of godhood to be alone—to be unique."

Then he was quite calm and hung quiescent in time and space while he mustered his thoughts for the creation.

"First," Finchley said at length, "I must have a heavenly throne that befits a god. Too, I must have a heavenly kingdom and angelic retainers; for no god is altogether complete without an entourage."

He hesitated while his mind rapidly sorted over the various heavenly kingdoms he had known. There was no need, he thought, to be especially original with this sort of thing. Originality would play an important role in the creation of his universe. Just now the only essential thing was to insure himself a reasonable degree of dignity and luxury—and for that the secondhand furnishings of ancient Yahweh would do.

Raising one hand in a self-conscious gesture, he commanded. Instantly the blackness was riven with light, and before him a flight of gold-veined marble steps rose to a glittering throne. The throne was high and cushioned. Arms, legs and back were of glowing silver, and the cushions were imperial purple. And yet—the whole was incredibly hideous. The legs were too long and thin, the arms were rachety, the back narrow and sickly.

Finchley said: "Owwww!" and tried to remodel. Yet no matter how he altered the proportions, the throne remained horrible. And for that matter, the steps, too, were disgusting, for by some freak of creation the gold veins twisted and curved through the marble to form obscene designs too reminiscent of the pictures Finchley had drawn in his past existence.

He gave it up at last, mounted the crooked steps and settled himself uneasily on the throne. It felt as though he was sitting on the lap of a corpse with dead arms poised to infold him in a ghastly embrace. He shuddered slightly and said: "Oh, hell, I was never a furniture designer—"

Finchley glanced around, then raised his hand again. The jet clouds that had crowded around the throne rolled back to reveal high columns of crystal and a soaring roof arched and paved with smooth blocks. The hall stretched back for thousands of yards like some never-ending cathedral, and all that length was filled with rank on rank of his retainers.

Foremost were the angels: slender, winged creatures, white-robed, with blond, shining heads, sapphire-blue eyes, and scarlet, smiling mouths. Behind the angels knelt the order of Cherubin: giant winged bulls with tawny hides and hoofs of beaten metal. Their Assyrian heads were heavily bearded with gleaming jet curls. Third were the Seraphim: ranks of huge six-winged serpents whose jeweled scales glittered with a startling silent flame.

As Finchley sat and stared at them with admiration for his handiwork, they chanted in soft unison: "Glory to god. Glory to the Lord Finchley, the All Highest. . . . Glory to the Lord Finchley—"

He sat and stared and it was as though his eyes were slowly acquiring the distortion of astigmatism, for he realized that this was more a cathedral of evil than of heaven. The columns were carved with revolting grotesques at the capitals and bases, and as the hall stretched into dimness it seemed peopled with cavorting shadows that grimaced and danced.

And in the far reaches of those twisting lengths, covert little scenes were playing that sickened him. Even as they chanted, the angels gazed sidelong with their glistening blue eyes at the Cherubin; and behind a column he saw one winged creature reach out and seize a lovely blond angel of lust to crush her to him.

In sheer desperation Finchley raised his hand again, and once more the blackness swirled around him—

"So much," he said, "for a Heavenly Kingdom—"

He pondered for another ineffable period as he drifted in emptiness, grappling with the most stupendous artistic problem he had ever attacked.

Up to now, Finchley thought with a shudder

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for the horror he had recently wrought, I have been merely playing—feeling my strength—warming up, so to speak, the way an artist will toy with pastel and a block of grained paper. Now it's time for me to go to work.

Solemnly, as he thought would befit a god, he conducted a laborious conference with himself in space.

What, he asked himself, has creation been in the past?

One might call it nature.

Very well, we shall call it nature. Now, what are the objections to nature's creation?

Why—nature was never an artist. Nature merely blundered into things in an experimental sort of way. Whatever beauty existed was merely a by-product. The difference be—

The difference, he interrupted himself, between the old nature and the new God Finchley shall be order. Mine will be an ordered cosmos devoid of waste and devoted to beauty. There will be nothing haphazard. There will be no blundering.

First, the canvas.

"There shall be infinite space!" Finchley cried.

In the nothingness, his voice roared through the bony structure of his skull and echoed in his ears with a flat, sour sound; but on the instant of command, the opaque blackness was filtered into a limpid jet. Finchley could still see nothing, but he felt the change.

He thought: Now, in the old cosmos there were simply stars and nebulae and vast fiery bodies scattered through the realms of the sky. No one knew their purpose—no one knew their origin or destination.

In mine there shall be purpose, for each body shall serve to support a race of creatures whose sole function shall be to serve me—

He cried: "Let there be universes to the number of one hundred, filling space. One thousand galaxies shall make up each universe, and one million suns shall be the sum of each galaxy. Ten planets shall circle each sun, and two moons each planet. Let all revolve around their creator! Let all this come to pass. Now!"

Finchley screamed in terror as light burst in a soundless cataclysm around him. Stars, close and hot as suns, distant and cold as pinpricks— Separately, by twos and in vast smudgy clouds— Blazing crimson—yellow—deep green and violet— The sum of their brilliance was a welter of light that constricted his heart and filled him with a devouring fear of the latent power within him.

"This," Finchley whimpered, "is enough cosmic creation for the time being—"

He closed his eyes determinedly and exerted his will once more. There was a sensation of solidity under his feet and when he opened his eyes cautiously he was standing on one of his earths with blue sky and a blue-white sun lowering swiftly toward the western horizon.

It was a bare, brown earth— Finchley had seen to that—it was a vast sphere of inchoate matter waiting for his molding, for he had decided that first above all other creation he would form a good green earth for himself—a planet of beauty where Finchley, God of all Creation, would reside in his Eden.

All through that waning afternoon he worked, swiftly and with artistic finesse. A vast ocean, green and with sparkling white foam, swept over half the globe; alternating hundreds of miles of watery space with clusters of warm islands. The single continent he divided in half with a backbone of jagged mountains that stretched from pole to snowy pole.

With infinite care he worked. Using oils, water colors, charcoal and plumbago sketches, he planned and executed his entire world. Mountains, valleys, plains; crags, precipices and mere boulders were all designed into a fluent congruence of beautifully balanced masses.

All his spirit of artistry went into the clever scattering of lakes like so many sparkling jewels; and into the cunning arabesques of winding rivers that traced intricate glistening designs over the face of the planet. He devoted himself to the selection of colors: gray gravels; pink, white and black sands; good earths, brown, umber and sepia; mottled shales, glistening micas and silica stones— And when the sun at last vanished on the first day of his labor, his Eden was a shining jewel of stone, earth and metal, ready for life.

As the sky darkened overhead, a pale, gibbous moon with a face of death was revealed riding in the vault of the sky; and even as Finchley gazed at it uneasily, a second moon with a blood-red disk lifted its ravaged countenance above the eastern horizon and began a ghastly march across the heavens. Finchley tore his eyes away from them and stared out at the twinkling stars.

There was much satisfaction to be gained from their contemplation. "I know exactly how many there are," he thought complacently. "You multiply one hundred by a thousand by a million and there's your answer— And that happens to be my idea of order!"

He lay back on a patch of warm, soft soil and placed palms under the back of his head, staring up. "And I know exactly what all of them are there for—to support human lives—the countless billions upon billions of lives which I shall design and create solely to serve and worship the Lord Finchley— That's purpose for you!"

And he knew where each of those blue and red and indigo sparks were going, for even in the vasty reaches of space they were thundering a circular course, the pivot of which was that point in

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the skies he had just left. Some day he would return to that place and there build his heavenly castle. Then he would sit through all eternity watching the wheeling flight of his worlds.

There was a peculiar splotch of red in the zenith of the sky. Finchley watched it absently at first, then with guarded attention as it seemed to burgeon. It spread slowly like an ink stain, and as the curious moments fled by, became tinged with orange and then the purest white. And for the first time Finchley was uncomfortably aware of a sensation of heat.

An hour passed and then two and three. The fist of red-white spread across the sky until it was a fiery nebulous cloud. A thin, tenuous edge approached a star gently, then touched. Instantly there was a blinding blaze of radiance and Finchley was flooded with gleaming, glittering light that illuminated the landscape with the eerie glow of flaring magnesium. The sensation of heat grew in intensity and tiny beads of perspiration prickled across his skin.

With midnight, the incredible inferno filled half the sky, and the gleaming stars, one after another, were bursting into silent explosions. The light was blinding white and the heat suffocating. Finchley tottered to his feet and began to run, searching vainly for shade or water. It was only then that he realized his universe was running amuck.

"No!" he cried desperately. "No!"

Heat bludgeoned him. He fell and rolled across cutting rocks that tore at him and anchored him back down with his face upthrust. Past his shielding hands, past his tight-shut eyelids, the intolerable light and heat pressed.

"Why should it go wrong?" Finchley screamed. "There was plenty of room for everything! Why should it—"

In heat-borne delirium he felt a thunderous rocking as though his Eden were beginning to split asunder.

He cried: "Stop! Stop! Everything stop!" He beat at his temples with futile fists and at last whispered: "All right . . . . if I've made another mistake then— All right—" He waved his hand feebly.

And instantly the skies were black and blank. Only the two scabrous moons rode overhead, beginning the long downward journey to the west. And in the east a faint glow hinted at the rising sun.

"So," Finchley murmured, "one must be more a mathematician and physicist to run a cosmos. Very well, I can learn all that later. I'm an artist and I never pretended to know all that. But . . . I *am* an artist, and there is still my good green earth to people— Tomorrow— We shall see . . . tomorrow—"

And so presently he slept.

The scarlet sun was high when he awoke, and its evil solitary eye filled him with unrest. Glancing at the landscape he had fashioned the day previous, he was even more uncertain; for there was some subtle distortion in everything. Valley floors looked unclean with the pale sheen of lepers scales. The mountain crags formed nebulous shapes suggestive only of terror. Even the lakes contained the hint of horror under their smooth, innocent surfaces.

Not, he noticed, when he stared directly at these creations, but only when his glance was sidelong. Viewed full-eyed and steadfastly, everything seemed to be right. Proportion was good, line was excellent, coloring perfection. And yet— He shrugged and decided he would have to put in some practice at drafting. No doubt there was some subtle error of distortion in his work.

He walked to a tiny stream and from the bank scooped out a mass of moist red clay. He kneaded it smooth, wet it down to a thin mud and strained it. After it had dried under the sun slightly he arranged a heavy block of stone as a pedestal and set to work.

His hands were still practiced and certain. With sure fingers he shaped his concept of a large, furred rabbit. Body, legs and head; exquisitely etched features—it crouched on the stone ready, it seemed, to leap off at a moment's notice. Finchley smiled affectionately at his work, his confidence at last restored. He tapped it once on the rounded head and said: "Live, my friend—"

There was a second's indecision while life invaded the clay form, then it arched its back with an incredibly clumsy motion and attempted to leap. It moved forward to the edge of the pedestal where it hung crazily for an instant before it dropped heavily to the ground. As it lumbered along on a crazy course, it uttered horrible little grunting sounds and turned once to gaze at Finchley. On that animal face was an evil expression of malevolence.

Finchley's smile froze. He frowned, hesitated, then scooped up another chunk of clay and set it on the stone. For the space of an hour he worked, shaping a graceful Irish setter. At last he tapped this, too, on the narrow skull and said: "Live—"

Instantly the dog collapsed. It mewled helplessly and then struggled to shaking feet like some enormous spider, eyes distended and glassy. It tottered to the edge of the pedestal, leaped off and collided with Finchley's leg. There was a low growl and the beast tore sharp fangs into Finchley's skin. He leaped back with a cry and kicked the animal furiously. Mewling and howling, the setter went gangling across the fields like a crippled monster.

With furious intent, Finchley returned to his work. Shape after shape he modeled and endowed

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with life; and each: ape, monkey, fox, weasel, rat, lizard and toad—fish; long and short, stout and slender—birds by the score—each was a grotesque monstrosity that swam, shambled or fluttered off like some feverish nightmare. Finchley was horrified and exhausted. He sat himself down on the pedestal and began to sob while his tired fingers still twitched and prodded at a lump of clay.

He thought: "I'm still an artist— What's gone wrong? What turns everything I do into horrible nonsense?"

His fingers turned and twisted, and without his realizing it, a head began to form in the clay.

He thought: "I made a fortune with my art once. Everyone couldn't have been crazy. They bought my work for many reasons—but an important one was that it was beautiful."

He stared at the lump of clay in his hands. It had been partially formed into a woman's head. He examined it closely and for the first time in many hours, he smiled.

"Why, of course!" he exclaimed. "I'm no shaper of animals. Let's see how well I do with a human figure—"

Swiftly, with heavy chunks of clay, he built up the understructure of his figure. Legs, arms, torso and head were formed. He hummed slightly under his breath as he worked, and he thought: She'll be the loveliest Eve ever created—and more—her children shall truly be the children of a god!

With loving hands he turned the full swelling calves and thighs, and cunningly joined slender ankles to graceful feet. The hips were rounded and girdled a flat slightly mounded belly. As he set the strong shoulders, he suddenly stopped and stepped back a pace.

Is it possible? He wondered.

He walked slowly around the half-completed figure.

Yes—

Force of habit, perhaps?

Perhaps that—and maybe the love he had borne for so many empty years.

He returned to the figure and redoubled his efforts. With a sense of growing elation, he completed arms, neck and head. There was a certainty within him that told him it was impossible to fail. He had modeled this figure too often not to know it down to the finest detail. And when he was finished, Theone Dubedat, magnificently sculped in clay, stood atop the stone pedestal.

Finchley was content. Wearily he sat down with his back to a jagged boulder, produced a cigarette from space and lit it. For perhaps a minute he sat, dragging in the smoke to quiet his jerking nerves. At last with a sense of chaotic anticipation he said: "Woman—"

He choked and stopped. Then he began again. "Be alive—Theone!"

The second of life came and passed. The nude

figure moved slightly, then began to tremble. Magnetically drawn, Finchley arose and stepped toward her, arms outstretched in mute appeal. There was a hoarse gasp of indrawn breath and slowly the great eyes opened and examined him.

The living girl straightened and screamed. Before Finchley could touch her she beat at his face, her long nails ripping his skin. She fell backward off the pedestal, leaped to her feet and began running off across the fields like all the

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others—running like a crazy, crippled creature while she screamed and howled. The low sun dappled her body and the shadow she cast was monstrous.

Long after she disappeared, Finchley continued to gaze in her direction while within him all that futile, bitter love surged and burned with an acid tide. At length he turned again to the pedestal and with icy impassivity set once more to work. Nor did he stop until the fifth in a succession of lurid creatures ran screaming out into the night—Then and only then did he stop and stand for a long time gazing alternately at his hands and the crazy, careening moons that sailed overhead.

There was a tap on his shoulder and he was not too surprised to see Lady Sutton standing beside him. She still wore the sequined evening gown, and in the lurid moonlight her face was as coarse and masculine as ever.

Finchley said: "Oh . . . it's you."

"How are you, Dig, m'lad?"

He thought it over, trying to bring some reason to the dumb despair and yet ludicrous insanity that pervaded his cosmos. At last he said: "Not so good, Lady Sutton."

"Trouble?"

"Yes—" He broke off and stared at her. "I say, Lady Sutton, how the devil did you get here?"

She laughed. "I'm dead, Dig. You ought to know."

"Dead? Oh . . . I—" He floundered in a horror of embarrassment.

"No hard feelings, though. I'd have done the same m'self, y'know."

"You would?"

"Anything for a new sensation. That was always our motto, eh?" She nodded complacently and grinned at him. It was that same old grin of pure deviltry.

Finchley said: "What are you doing here? I mean, how did—"

"I said I was dead," Lady Sutton interrupted. "There's lots you don't understand about this business of dying."

"But this is my own personal private reality. I own it."

"And I'm still dead, Dig. I can get into any bloody damned reality I choose. Wait—you'll find out."

He said: "I won't—ever— That is, I can't. Because I won't ever die."

"Oh-ho?"

"No, I won't. I'm a god."

"You are, eh? How d'you like it?"

"I . . . I don't." He faltered for words. "I . . . that is, someone promised me a reality I could shape for myself, but I can't, Lady Sutton, I can't."

"And why not?"

"I don't know. I'm a god, and yet every time I try to shape something beautiful it turns out disgusting and loathsome."

"As how, for instance?"

He showed her the twisted mountains and plains, the evil lakes and rivers, the distorted grunting creatures he had created. All this Lady Sutton examined carefully and with close attention. At last she pursed her lips and thought for a moment; then she gazed keenly at Finchley and said: "Odd that you've never made a mirror, Dig."

"A mirror?" he echoed. "No, I haven't— I never needed one—"

"Go ahead. Make one now."

He gave her a perplexed look, and still staring at her, waved a hand in the air. A square of silvered glass appeared in his hand and he held it toward her.

"No," Lady Sutton said, "it's for you. Look in it."

Wondering, he raised the mirror and gazed in it. He uttered a hoarse cry and peered closer. Leering back at him out of the dim night was the distorted, evil face of a gargoyle. In the small slant-set eyes, the splayed nose, the broken yellow teeth, the twisted ruin of a face he saw everything he had seen in his ugly cosmos.

He saw the distorted cathedral of heaven and all its unholy hierarchy of ribald retainers; the spinning chaos of crashing stars and suns; the lurid landscape of his Eden; each mewling, ghastly creature he had created; every individual horror that his brain had spawned.

Violently he hurled the mirror spinning and turned to confront Lady Sutton.

"What?" he demanded hoarsely, "what is this?"

"Why, you're a god, Dig," Lady Sutton laughed, "and you ought to know that a god can create only in his own image. Yes—the answer's as simple as that. It's a grand joke, ain't it?"

"Joke?" The import of all the eons to come thundered down over his head. An eternity of living with his hideous self, upon himself, inside himself—over and over, re-repeated in every sun and star, every living and dead thing, every creature, every everlasting moment. A monstrous god feeding upon himself and slowly, inexorably going mad.

"Joke!" he screamed.

He flung out his hand and instantly he floated once more, suspended out of all contact with mass and matter. Once more he was utterly alone, with nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to touch. And as he pondered for another ineffable period on the inevitable futility of his next attempt, he heard quite distinctly, the deep bellow of familiar laughter.

Of such was the Kingdom of Finchley's Heaven.

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III.

"Give me the strength! Oh, give me the strength!"

She went through the veil sharp on Finchley's heels, that short, slender, dark woman; and she found herself in the dungeon passage of Sutton Castle. For a moment she was startled out of her prayer, half disappointed at not finding a land of mists and dreams. Then, with a bitter smile, she recalled the reality she wanted.

Before her stood a suit of armor; a strong, graceful figure of polished metal edged with sweeping flutings. She went to it and stared. Dully from the gleaming steel cuirass, a slightly distorted reflection stared back. It showed the drawn, high-strung face, the coal-black eyes, the coal-black hair dipping down over the brow in a sharp widow's peak. It said: "This is Sidra Peel. This is a woman whose past has been fettered to a dull-witted creature that called itself her husband. She will break that chain this day if only she finds the strength—"

"Break the chain!" she murmured fiercely, "and this day repay him for a life's worth of agony. God—if there be a god in my world—help me balance the account in full! Help me—"

Sidra stared, then froze while her pulse jerked wildly. Someone had come soundlessly down the lonesome passage and stood behind her. She could feel the heat—the aura of a presence—the almost imperceptible pressure of a body against hers. Mistily in the mirror of the armor she made out a face peering over her shoulder.

She spun around, crying: "Ahhhh!"

"So sorry," he said. "Thought you were expecting me."

Her eyes riveted to his face. He was smiling slightly in an affable manner, and yet the streaked blond hair, the hollows and mounds, the pulsing veins and shadows of his features were a lurid landscape of raw emotions.

"Calm yourself," he said while she teetered crazily and fought down the screams that were tearing through her.

"But wh-who—" she broke off and tried to swallow.

"I thought you were expecting me," he repeated.

"I . . . expecting you?"

He nodded and took her hands. Against his, her palms felt chilled and moist. "We had an engagement."

She opened her mouth slightly and shook her head.

"At twelve forty—" He released one of her hands to look at his watch. "And here I am, on the dot."

"No," she said, yanking herself away. "No, this is impossible. We have no engagement. I don't know you."

"You don't recognize me, Sidra? Well—that's odd; but I think you'll recollect who I am before long."

"But who are you?"

"I shan't tell you. You'll have to remember yourself."

A little calmer, she inspected his features closely. Suddenly, with the rush of a waterfall, a blended sensation of attraction and repulsion surged over her. This man alarmed and fascinated her. She was filled with horror at his mere presence, yet intrigued and drawn.

At last she shook her head and said: "I still don't understand. I never called for you, Mr. Whoever-you-are, and we had no engagement."

"You most certainly did."

"I most certainly did not!" she flared, outraged by his insolent assurance. "I wanted my old world. The same old world I'd always known—"

"But with one exception?"

"Y-yes—" Her furious glance faltered and the rage drained out of her. "Yes, with one exception."

"And you prayed for the strength to make that exception?"

She nodded.

He grinned and took her arm. "Well, Sidra, then you did call for me and we did have an engagement. I'm the answer to your prayer."

She suffered herself to be led through the narrow, steep-mounting passages, unable to break free of that magnetic leash. His touch on her arm was a frightening thing. Everything in you cried out against the misery and disgust—and yet another something in you welcomed it eagerly.

As they passed through the cloudy light of infrequent lamps, she watched him covertly. He was tall and magnificently built. Thick cords strained in his muscular neck at the slightest turn of his arrogant head. He was dressed in tweeds that had the texture of sandstone and gave off a pungent, peaty scent. His shirt was open at the collar, and where his chest showed it was thickly matted.

There were no servants about on the street floor of the castle. The man escorted her quietly through the graceful rooms to the foyer where he removed her coat from the closet and placed it around her shoulders. Suddenly he pressed his hard hands against her arms.

She tore herself away at last, one of the old rages sweeping over her. In the quiet gloom of the foyer she could see that he was still smiling, and it added fuel to her fury.

"Ah," she cried, "what a fool I am . . . to take you so for granted. 'I prayed for you—' you say. 'I know you—' What kind of a booby do you think I am? Keep your hands off me!"

She glared at him, breathing heavily, and he

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made no answer. His expression remained unchanged. It's like those snakes, she thought, those snakes with the jeweled eyes. They coil in their impassive beauty and you can't escape the deadly fascination. It's like soaring towers that make you want to leap to earth—like keen, glittering razors that invite the tender flesh of your throat. You can't escape!

"Go on!" she screamed in a last desperate effort. "Get out of here! This is my world. It's all mine to do with as I choose. I want no part of your kind of rotten, arrogant swine!"

Swiftly, silently, he gripped her shoulders and brought her close to him. While he kissed her she struggled against the hard talons of his fingers and tried to force her mouth away from his. And yet she knew that if he had released her she could not have torn herself away from that savage kiss.

She was sobbing when he relaxed his grip and let her head drop back. Still in the affable tones of a casual conversation he said: "You want one thing in this world of yours, Sidra, and you must have me to help you."

"In Heaven's name, who are you?"

"I'm that strength you prayed for. Now come along."

Outside the night was pitch black, and after they had gotten into Sidra's roadster and started for London, the road was impossible to follow. As she edged the car cautiously along, Sidra was able at last to make out the limed white line that bisected the road, and the lighter velvet of the sky against the jet of the horizon. Overhead the Milky Way was a long smudge of powder.

The wind on her face was good to feel. Passionate, reckless and headstrong as ever, she pressed her foot on the accelerator and sent the car roaring down the dangerous dark road, eager for more of the cool breeze against her cheeks and brow. The wind tugged at her hair and sent it streaming back. The wind gusted over the top of the glass shield and around it like a solid stream of cold water. It whipped up her courage and confidence. Best of all, it recalled her sense of humor.

Without turning, she called: "What's your name?"

And dimly through the chattering breeze came his answer: "Does it matter?"

"It certainly does. Am I supposed to call you: 'Hey!' or 'I say there—' or 'Dear sir—'"

"Very well, Sidra. Call me Ardis."

"Ardis? That's not English, is it?"

"Does it matter?"

"Don't be so mysterious. Of course it matters. I'm trying to place you."

"I see."

"D'you know Lady Sutton?"

Receiving no answer she glanced at him and received a slight chill. He did look mysterious with his head silhouetted against the star-filled sky. He looked out of place in an open roadster.

"D'you know Lady Sutton?" she repeated.

He nodded and she turned her attention back to the road. They had left the open country and were boring through the London suburbs. The little squat houses, all alike, all flat-faced and muddy-colored, whisked past with a muffled *whump-whump-whump*, echoing back the drone of the engine.

Still gay, she asked: "Where are you stopping?"

"In London."

"Where, in London."

"Chelsea Square."

"The Square? That's odd. What number?"

"One hundred and forty-nine."

She burst into laughter. "Your impudence is too wonderful," she gasped, glancing at him again. "That happens to be my address."

He nodded. "I know that, Sidra."

Her laughter froze—not at the words, for she had hardly heard them. Barely suppressing another scream, she turned and stared through the windshield, her hands trembling violently on the wheel. For the man sat there in the midst of that howling turmoil of wind and not a hair of his head was moving.

"Merciful Heaven!" she cried in her heart, "what kind of a mess did I— Who is this monster, this— Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy— Get rid of him! I don't want him. If I've asked for him, consciously or not, I don't want him now. I want my world changed. Right now! I want him out of it!"

"It's no use, Sidra," he said.

Her lips twitched and still she prayed: "Get him out of here! Change anything—everything, only take him away. Let him vanish. Let the darkness and the void devour him. Let him dwindle, fade—"

"Sidra," he shouted, "stop that!" He poked her violently. "You can't get rid of me that way—it's too late!"

She stopped as a final panic overtook her and congealed her brain.

"Once you've decided on your world," Ardis explained carefully as though to a child, "you're committed to it. There's no changing your mind and making minor alterations. Weren't you told?"

"No," she whispered, "we weren't told."

"Well, now you know."

She was mute, numb and wooden. Not so much wooden as putty. She followed his directions without a word; drove carefully to the little park of trees that was behind her house, and parked there. Very carefuly, Ardis explained that they

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would have to enter the house through the servants' door.

"You don't," he said, "walk openly to murder. Only clever criminals in storybooks do that. We, in real life, find it best to be cautious."

Real life! she thought hysterically as they got out of the car. Reality! That Thing in the shelter—

Aloud, she said: "You sound experienced."

"Through the park," he answered, touching her lightly on the arm. "We shan't be seen."

The path through the trees was narrow and the grass and prickly shrubs on either side were high. Ardis stepped aside and then followed her as she passed the iron gate and entered. He strode a few paces behind her.

"As to experience," he said, "yes—I've had plenty. But then, you ought to know, Sidra."

She didn't know. She didn't answer. Trees, brush and grass were thick around her, and although she had traversed this park a hundred times, they were alien and distorted. They were not alive—no, thank God for that—she was not yet imagining things; but for the first time she realized how skeletal and haunted they looked. Almost as if each had participated in some sordid murder or suicide through the years.

Deeper into the park, a dank mist made her cough, and behind her, Ardis patted her back sympathetically. She quivered like a length of supple steel under his touch, and when she had stopped coughing and the hand still remained on her shoulder, she knew in another burst of terror what he would attempt here in the darkness.

She quickened her stride. The hand left her shoulder and hooked at her arm. She yanked her arm free and ran crazily down the path, stumbling on her stilt heels. There was a muffled exclamation from Ardis and she heard the swift pound of his feet as he pursued her.

The path led down a slight depression and past a marshy little pond. The earth turned moist and sucked at her feet with hollow grunts. In the warmth of the night her skin began to prickle and perspire, but the sound of his panting was close behind her.

Her breath was coming in gasps and when the path veered and began to mount, she felt her lungs would burst. Her legs were aching and it seemed that at the next instant she would flounder to the ground. Dimly through the trees, she made out the iron gate at the other side of the park, and with the little strength left to her she redoubled her efforts to reach it.

But what, she wondered dizzily, what after that? He'll overtake me in the street— Perhaps before the street— I should have turned for the car— I could have driven— I—

He clutched at her shoulder as she passed the gate and she would have surrendered at that moment. Then she heard voices and saw figures on the street across from her. She cried: "Hello, there!" and ran to them, her shoes clattering on the pavement. As she came close, still free for the moment, they turned.

"So sorry," she babbled crazily, "thought I recognized you . . . was walking through the par—"

She stopped short. Staring at her were Finchley, Braugh and Lady Sutton.

"Sidra darling! What the devil are you doing here?" Lady Sutton demanded. She cocked her gross head forward to examine Sidra's face, then nudged at Braugh and Finchley with her elbows. "The girl's been running through the park. Mark my words, Chris, she's touched."

"Looks like she's been chevied," Braugh answered. He stepped to one side and peered past Sidra's shoulder, his white head gleaming in the starlight.

Sidra caught her breath at last and looked about uneasily. Ardis stood alongside her, calm and affable as ever. There was, she thought helplessly, no use trying to explain. No one would believe her. No one would help.

She said: "Just a bit of exercise. It was such a lovely night."

"Exercise!" Lady Sutton snorted. "Now I know you're cracked!"

Finchley said: "Why'd you pop off like that, Sidra? Bob was furious. We've just been driving him home."

"I—" It was too insane. She'd seen Finchley vanish through the veil of fire less than an hour ago—vanish into the world of his own choosing. Yet here he was, asking questions.

Ardis murmured: "Finchley was in your world, too. He's still here."

"But that's impossible!" Sidra exclaimed. "There can't be two Finchleys."

"Two Finchleys?" Lady Sutton echoed. "Now I know where you've been and gone, my girl! You're drunk. Reeling, stinking drunk. Running through the park! Exercise! Two Finchleys!"

And Lady Sutton? But she was dead. She had to be! They'd murdered her less than—

Again Ardis murmured: "That was another world ago, Sidra. This is your new world, and Lady Sutton belongs in it. Everyone belongs in it—except your husband."

"But . . . even though she's dead?"

Finchley started and asked: "Who's dead?"

"I think," Braugh said, "we'd better get her upstairs and put her to bed."

"No," Sidra said, "no—there's no need—really! I'm quite all right."

"Oh, let her be!" Lady Sutton grunted. She gathered her coat around her tub of a waist and

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moved off. "You know our motto, m'lads. 'Never Interfere.' See you and Bob at the shelter next week, Sidra. 'Night—"

"Good night."

Finchley and Braugh moved off, too—the three figures merging with the shadows with the delicate shadings of a misty fade-out. And as they vanished, Sidra heard Braugh murmur: "The motto ought to be 'Unashamed'!"

"Nonsense," Finchley answered. "Shame is a sensation we seek like all others, it redu—"

Then they were gone.

And with a return of that horrible chill, Sidra realized that they had not seen Ardis—nor heard him—nor been aware even of his—

"Naturally," Ardis interrupted.

"But how, naturally?"

"You'll understand later. Just now we've a murder before us."

"No!" she cried, hanging back. "No!"

"How's this, Sidra? And after you've looked forward to this moment for so many years. Planned it. Feasted on it—"

"I'm . . . too upset . . . unnerved."

"You'll be calmer. Come along."

Together they walked a few steps down the narrow street, turned up the gravel path and passed the gate that led to the back court. As Ardis reached out for the knob of the servants' door, he hesitated and turned a suffused face to her.

"This," he said, "is your moment, Sidra. It begins now. This is the time when you break that chain and make payment for a life's worth of agony. This is the day when you balance the account. Love is good—hate is better. Forgiveness is a trifling virtue—passion is all-consuming and the end-all of living!"

He pushed open the door, grasped her elbow and dragged her after him into the pantry. It was dark and filled with odd corners. They eased through the darkness cautiously, reached the swinging door that led to the kitchen, and pushed past it. Sidra stared and gagged. She uttered a faint moan and sagged against Ardis.

It *had* been a kitchen at one time. Now the stoves and sinks, cupboards and tables, chairs, closets and all loomed high and twisted like the distorted scenery of a nightmare jungle. A dull-blue spark glittered on the floor, and around it cavorted a score of silent shadows.

They were solidified smoke—semiliquid gas. Their translucent depths writhed and interplayed with the nauseating surge of living muck. Like looking through a microscope, Sidra thought in sick horror, at those creatures that foul corpse-blood; that scum a slack-water stream; that fill a swamp with noisome vapors— And most hideous of all, they were all in the wavering gusty image of her husband. Twenty Robert Peels, gesticulating obscenely and singing a whispered chorus:

"Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa
Perfusus liquidis urget odoribus
Grato, Sidra, sub antro?"

"Ardis! What is this?"

"Don't know yet, Sidra."

"But these shapes!"

"We'll find out."

Twenty leaping vapors crowded around them, still chanting. Sidra and Ardis were driven forward and stood at the brink of that sapphire spark that burned in the air a few inches above the floor. Gaseous fingers pushed and probed at Sidra, pinched and prodded while the blue figures cavorted with hissing laughter, slapping their naked rumps in weird ecstasies.

A slash on Sidra's arm made her start and cry out, and when she looked down, unaccountable beads of blood stood out on the white skin of her wrist. And even as she stared in disembodied enchantment, her wrist was raised to Ardis' lips. Then his wrist was raised to her mouth and she felt the stinging salt of his blood on her lips.

"No!" she screamed. "I don't believe this. You're making me see this—"

She turned and ran from the kitchen toward the serving pantry. Ardis was close behind her. And the blue shapes still hissed a droning chorus:

"Qui nunc te fruitur credulus aurea;
Qui semper vacuam, semper amabilem,
Sperat, nescius aurae
Fallacis—"

When they reached the foot of the winding stairs that led to the upper floors, Sidra clutched at the balustrade for support. With her free hand she dabbed at her mouth to erase the salt taste that made her stomach crawl.

"I think I've an idea what all that was," Ardis said.

She stared at him.

"A sort of betrothal ceremony," he went on casually. "You've read of something like that before, haven't you? Odd, wasn't it— Some powerful influences in this house. Recognize those phantoms?"

She shook her head insanely. What was the use of thinking—talking?

"Didn't, eh? We'll have to see about this. I never cared for unsolicited haunting. We shan't have any more of this tomfoolery in the future—" He mused for a moment, then pointed up the stairs. "Your husband's up there, I think. Let's continue."

They trudged up the sweeping gloomy stairs, and the last vestiges of Sidra's sanity struggled

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up, step by step, with her.

One— You go up the stairs. Stairs leading up to what? More madness? That damned Thing in the shelter!

Two— This is hell, not reality.

Three— Or nightmare. Yes! Nightmare. Lobster last night. Where were we last night, Bob and I?

Four— Dear Bob. Why did I ever— And this Ardis. I know why he's so familiar. Why he almost speaks my thoughts. He's probably some—

Five— Nice young man who plays tennis in real life. Distorted by a dream. Yes.

Six—

Seven—

"Don't run into it!" Ardis cautioned.

She halted in her tracks, and simply stared. There were no more screams or shudders left in her. She simply stared at the thing that hung with a twisted head from the beam over the stair landing. It was her husband, limp and slack, dangling at the end of a length of laundry rope.

The limp figure swayed ever so slightly, like the gentle swing of a massive pendulum. The mouth was wrinkled into a sardonic grin and the eyes popped from their sockets and glanced down at her with impudent humor. Vaguely, Sidra was aware that ascending steps behind it showed through the twisted form.

"Join hands," the corpse said in sacrosanct tones.

"Bob!"

"Your husband?" Ardis exclaimed.

"Dearly beloved," the corpse began, "we are gathered together in the sight of God and in the face of this company to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is commanded to be honorable among all men and therefore is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly—" The voice boomed on and on and on.

"Bob!" Sidra croaked.

"Kneel!" the corpse commanded.

Sidra flung her body to one side and ran stumbling up the stairs. She faltered for a gasping instant, then Ardis' strong hands grasped her. Behind them the shadowy corpse intoned: "I pronounce you man and wife—"

Ardis whispered: "We must be quick, now! Very quick!"

But at the head of the stairs Sidra made a last bid for liberty. She abandoned all hope of sanity, of understanding. All she wanted was freedom—and a place where she could sit in solitude, free of the passions that were hedging her in, gutting her soul. There was no word spoken, no gesture made. She drew herself up and faced Ardis squarely. This was one of the times, she understood, when you fought motionlessly.

For minutes they stood, facing each other in the dark hall. To their right was the descending well of the stairs; to the left, Sidra's bedroom; behind them, the short hallway that led to Peel's study—to the room where he was so unconsciously awaiting slaughter. Their eyes met, clashed and battled silently. And even as Sidra met that deep, gleaming glance, she knew with an agonizing sense of desperation that she would lose.

There was no longer any will, any strength, any courage left in her. Worse, by some spectral osmosis it seemed to have drained out of her into the man that faced her. While she fought she realized that her rebellion was like that of a hand or a finger rebelling against its guiding brain.

Only one sentence she spoke: "For Heaven's sake! *Who are you?*"

And again he answered: "You'll find out—soon. But I think you know already. I think you know!"

Helpless, she turned and entered her bedroom. There was a revolver there and she understood she was to get it. But when she pulled open the drawer and yanked aside the piles of silk clothes to pick it up, the clothes felt thick and moist. As she shuddered, Ardis reached past her and picked up the gun. Clinging to the butt, a finger tight-clenched around the trigger, was a hand, the stump of a wrist clotted and torn.

Ardis clucked his lips impatiently and tried to pry the hand loose. It would not give. He pressed and twisted a finger at a time and still the sickening corpse-hand clenched the gun stubbornly. Sidra sat at the edge of the bed like a child, watching the spectacle with naïve interest, noting the way the broken muscles and tendons on the stump flexed as Ardis tugged.

There was a crimson snake oozing from under the closed bathroom door. It writhed across the hardwood floor, thickening to a small river as it touched her skirt so gently. As Ardis tossed the gun down angrily, he noted the stream. Quickly he stepped to the bathroom and thrust open the door, then slammed it a second later. He jerked his head at Sidra and said: "Come on!"

She nodded mechanically and arose, careless of the sopping skirt that smacked against her calves. At Peel's study she turned the doorknob carefully until a faint click warned her that the latch was open, then she pushed the door in. The leaf opened to reveal her husband's study in semi-darkness. The desk was before the high window curtains and Peel sat at it, his back to them. He was hunched over a candle or a lamp or some rosy light that enhaloed his body and sent streams of light flickering out. He never moved.

Sidra tiptoed forward, then hesitated. Ardis touched finger to lips and moved like a swift cat to the cold fireplace where he picked up the heavy bronze poker. He brought it to Sidra and held it out urgently. Her hand reached out of its own accord and took the cool metal handle. Her fingers

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gripped it as though they had been born for murder.

Against all that impelled her to advance and raise the poker over Peel's head, something weak and sick inside her cried out and prayed. Cried, prayed and moaned with the mewlings of a fevered child. Like spilt water, the last few drops of her self-possessions trembled before they disappeared altogether.

Then Ardis touched her. His finger pressed against the small of her back and a charge of bestiality shocked along her spine with cruel, jagged edges. Surging with hatred, rage and livid vindictiveness, she raised the poker high and crashed it down over the still-motionless head of her husband.

The entire room burst into a silent explosion. Lights flared and shadows whirled. Remorselessly, she beat and pounded at the falling body that toppled out of the chair to the floor. She struck again and again, her breath whistling hysterically, until the head was a mashed, bloodied pulp. Only then did she let the poker drop and reel back.

Ardis knelt beside the body and turned it over. "He's dead all right. This is the moment you prayed for, Sidra. You're free!"

She looked down in horror. Dully, from the crimsoned carpet, a slightly distorted corpse face stared back. It showed the drawn, high-strung features, the coal-black eyes, the coal-black hair dipping over the brow in a sharp widow's peak.

She moaned as understanding touched her.

The face said: "This is Sidra Peel. In this man whom you have slaughtered you have killed yourself—killed the only part of yourself worth saving."

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She cried: "Aieeee—" and clasped arms about herself, rocking in agony.

"Look well on me," the face said. "By my death you have broken a chain—only to find another!"

And she knew. She understood. For though she still rocked and moaned in the agony that would be never-ending, she saw Ardis arise and advance on her with arms outstretched. His eyes gleamed and were pools of horror; and his reaching arms were tendrils of her own unslaked passion eager to infold her. And once infolded, she knew there would be no escape—no escape from this sickening marriage to her own lusts that would forever caress her.

So it would be forevermore in Sidra's brave new world.

IV.

After the others had passed the veil, Christian Braugh still lingered in the shelter. He lit another cigarette with a simulation of perfect aplomb, blew out the match, then called: "Er . . . Mr. Thing?"

"What is it, Mr. Braugh?"

Braugh could not restrain a slight start at that voice sounding from nowhere. "I—well, the fact is, I stayed for a chat."

"I thought you would, Mr. Braugh."

"You did, eh?"

"Your insatiable hunger for fresh material is no mystery to me."

"Oh!" Braugh looked around nervously. "I see."

"Nor is there any cause for alarm. No one will overhear us. Your masquerade will remain undetected."

"Masquerade!"

"You're not a really bad man, Mr. Braugh. You've never belonged in the Sutton shelter clique."

Braugh laughed sardonically.

"And there's no need to continue your sham before me," the voice continued in the friendliest manner. "I know the story of your many plagiarisms was merely another concoction from the fertile imagination of Christian Braugh."

"You know?"

"Of course. You created that legend to obtain entree to the shelter. For years you've been playing the role of a lying scoundrel, even though your blood ran cold at times."

"And do you know why I did that?"

"Naturally. As a matter of fact, Mr. Braugh, I know almost everything; but I do confess that one thing still confuses me."

"What's that?"

"Why, in that devouring appetite for fresh material, were you not content to work as other authors do? Why this almost insane desire for unique material—for absolutely untrodden fields? Why were you willing to pay such a bitter and often exorbitant price for a few ounces of novelty?"

"Why—" Braugh sucked in smoke and gushed it out past clenched teeth. "I'll tell you why. It's something that's been torturing me all my life. A man is born with imagination."

"Ah . . . imagination."

"If his imagination is slight, a man will always find the world a source of deep and infinite wonder, a place of many delights. But if his imagination is strong, vivid, restless, he finds the world a sorry place indeed—a drab jade beside the wonders of his own creations!"

"There are wonders past all imagining."

"For whom? Not for me, my invisible friend. Nor for any earth-bound, flesh-bound creature. Man is a pitiful thing. Born with the imagination of gods and forever pasted to a round lump of spittle and clay. I have within me the uniqueness, the ego, the fertile loam of a timeless spirit . . . and all that richness is wrapped in a parcel of quickly rotting skin!"

"Ego—" mused the voice. "That is something which, alas, none of us can understand. Nowhere in all the knowable cosmos is it to be found but on your planet, Mr. Braugh. It is a frightening thing and convinces me at times that yours is the race that will—" The voice broke off abruptly.

"That will—" Braugh prompted.

"Come," said the Thing briskly, "there is less owing you than the others and I shall give you the benefit of my experience. Let me help you select a reality."

Braugh pounced on the word: "Less?"

And again he was brushed aside. "Will you have another reality in your own cosmos? I can offer you vast worlds, tiny worlds; great creatures that shake space and fill the voids with their thunders, little creatures of charm and perfection that barely touch the ear with the sensitive timbre of their tinkling. Will you care for terror? I can give you a reality of shudders. Beauty? I can show you realities of infinite ecstasy. Pain. Torture. Any sensation. Name one, several, all. I will shape you a reality to outdo even the giant intellect that is assuredly yours."

"No—" Braugh answered at length. "The senses are only senses at best—and in time they tire of anything. You cannot satisfy the imagination with whipped cream in new forms and flavors."

"Then I can take you to worlds of extra dimensions that will stun your imagination. There is a region I know that will entertain you forever with incongruity—where, if you sorrow, you scratch your ear; where, if you love, you eat a potato; where, if you die, you burst out laughing—

"There is a dimension I have seen where one

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can assuredly perform the impossible—where creatures daily compete in the composition of paradox and where the mere feat of turning oneself mentally inside out is known as *'chrythna,'* which is to say, *'corny'* in the American jargon.

"Do you want to probe the emotions in classical order? I can take you to a dimension of twenty-seven planes where one by one, *seriatim et privatim,* you may exhaust the intricate nuances of the twenty-seven primary emotions—and thence go on to infinite combinations and permutations. Come, which will you take?"

"None," Braugh said impatiently. "It is obvious, my friend, that you do not understand the ego of man. The ego is not a childish thing to be satisfied with toys; and yet it is a childish thing in that it yearns after the unattainable—"

"Yours seems to be a childish thing in that it does not laugh. You have no sense of humor, Mr. Braugh."

"The ego," Braugh continued abstractedly, "desires only what it cannot hope to attain. Once a thing is attainable, it is no longer desired. Can you grant me a reality where I may possess something which I desire because I cannot possibly possess it; and by that same possession not break the qualifications of my desire? Can you do this?"

"I'm afraid," the voice answered hesitantly, "that your imagination reasons too deviously for me."

"Ah," Braugh murmured, half to himself. "I was afraid of that. Why does the universe seem to be run by second-rate individuals not half so clever as myself? Why this mediocrity in the appointed authorities?"

"You seek to attain the unattainable," the voice said in reasonable tones, "and by that act not to attain it. The limitations are within yourself. Would you be changed?"

"No . . . no, not changed." Braugh shook his head. He stood for a moment deep in thought, then sighed and tamped out his cigarette. "There's only one solution for my problem."

"And that is?"

"Erasure. If you cannot satisfy a desire, you must explain it away. If a man cannot find love, he must write a psychological treatise on passion. I shall do much the same thing—"

He shrugged and moved toward the veil. There was a slight motion behind him and the voice asked: "Where does that ego of yours take you, O man?"

"To the truth of things," Braugh called. "If I cannot slake my yearning, at least I shall find out why I yearn."

"You'll find the truth only in hell, my friend."

"How so?"

"Because truth is always hell."

"Nevertheless I'm going there—to hell or wherever truth is to be found."

"May you find the answers pleasant, O man."

"Thank you."

"And may you learn to laugh."

But Braugh no longer heard, for he had passed the veil.

And he found himself standing before a high desk—a bench, almost—as high as the top of his head. Around him was nothing else. It looked as though a sulphurous fog had filled the room, concealing everything but this clerkly bench. Braugh tilted his head back and looked up. Staring down at him from the other side was a tiny little face, ancient as sin, whiskered and cockeyed. It was on a shriveled little head that was covered with a high-pointed hat. Like a sorcerer's cap.

Or a dunce cap, Braugh thought.

Dimly, behind the head, he made out towering shelves of books and files labeled: A—AB, AC—AD, and so on. There was also a gleaming black pot of ink and a rack of quill pens. An enormous hourglass completed the picture. Inside the hourglass a spider had spun a web and was crawling shakily across sand-clotted strands.

The little man croaked: "A-mazing! A-stonishing! In-credible!"

Braugh still stared.

The little man hunched forward like Richard Crook-Back in an amateur play and got his seamed, comical face as close as possible to Braugh's. He reached down a knobby finger and poked Braugh gingerly. Abruptly he tumbled backward and bawled: "THAMM—UZ! DA—GON! RIMM—ON!"

There was a busy bustle and three more little men bounced up behind the desk and gaped at Braugh. The staring went on for minutes.

"All right," Braugh said at last. "That's enough gawping. Say something. Do something!"

"It speaks!" they shouted in unison. "It's alive!" They pressed four noses together and began to gabble swiftly. It went: "MostastonishingthingDagonthatIeverhespeaksRimmoncoulditbehumanheardwhatitsaidBelialyou'dthinktheremustbesomeexplanationd'youthinksoThammuzIcan'tsay!"

Then it stopped.

One said: "First thing is to find out how it got here."

"Not at all. Find out what it is."

The third said: "Find out where it's from."

"I don't know about that, Belial. Cart before the horse, you know."

They raved and again turned noses together. The gabble was very loud: "THEIMPORTANTTHING'SWHERENOTATALLIT'SWHEREFROMYOU'RECRAZYYOU'REBOTHCRAZYLISTENTOMEHOWCANYOUOHALLRIGHTALLRIGHTALLRIGHT!"

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Then apparently they came to a decision. The number one sorcerer pointed an accusing finger at Braugh and said: "What are you doing here?"

"The point is," Braugh countered, "where am I?"

The little man turned to brothers Thammuz, Dagon and Rimmon. He smirked and said: "It wants to know where it is."

Dagon said: "Silly animal, ain't he, Belial?"

Rimmon said: "Oh, get on with it, Belial. Can't hold up business all day."

"You!" Belial swiveled on Braugh. "Listen carefully. This is General Administration, Universal Control Center. Belial, Rimmon, Dagon and Thammuz, acting for Satan."

"Tuts," said Braugh, "I came here to see Satan."

"It wants to see Satan!" They were utterly appalled. Then Dagon jabbed the others with his sharp little elbows and placed a finger alongside his nose with a shrewd look.

"Spy!" he said. To elaborate, he jabbed one finger significantly toward the ceiling, then gave a clipped nod.

"Could be . . . could be," Belial said, flipping the pages of a giant ledger. "It certainly don't belong here. No deliveries scheduled today. It's not dead because it don't smell. It's not alive because only the dead ones come here. Question still is: What is it? What do we do with it?"

Thammuz said: "Divination. Only answer."

"Right!"

"Right you are, Thammuz!"

"Great mind, that Thammuz!"

Belial glared at Braugh and snapped: "Name?"

"Christian Braugh."

"Ha!" cried Dagon. "Onomancy—C, third letter—H, eighth letter—and so on. Take total sum. Double it and add ten. Divide by two, then subtract original total—"

They added and divided. Quills scratched on parchment and a bumbling, muttering noise droned. At last Belial held up the scrap and scrutinized it carefully. They all scrutinized it. As one man they shrugged and tore the parchment up.

"I can't understand it," Dagon complained. "We always get five for an answer."

"Never mind!" Belial glared at Braugh. "When born?"

"December eighteenth, nineteen thirteen."

"Time?"

"Twelve fifteen, a. m."

"Star Charts!" screamed Thammuz. "We'll try Genethliacs."

They tore at the books behind them and took out huge sheets that unrolled like window shades. This time it took them fifteen minutes to produce a scrap of parchment which they again examined carefully and again tore up.

Rimmon said: "It *is* odd."

Belial said: "It gets odder and odder."

Thammuz said: "We better take it into the laboratory for a check. The old boy will be plenty peeved if we muff this one."

They leaned over the bench and beckoned imperatively. Braugh followed their directions, walked around the side of the bench and found himself before a small door set in the books. The four little sorcerers bounced down from the desk and crowded him through. They just about came up to his waist.

Braugh entered the so-called laboratory. It was a circular room with a low ceiling, tile floors and walls covered with cupboards, shelves, glass gimicks, alchemists' gadgets, books, bones and bottles. In the center was a large flat rock, the shape of a millstone. There was a slight depression in the center that had a charred look. But there wasn't any chimney over it.

Belial rooted around in a corner and came out with an armful of dry sticks.

"Altar fire," he said and tripped. The sticks went flying. Braugh solemnly bent to pick up the pieces of wood.

"Sortilege!" Rimmon squawked. He yanked a lizard out of a box and began writing on its back with a piece of charcoal, noting the order in which Braugh picked up the scattered bits of wood.

"Which way is east?" Rimmon demanded, crawling after the lizard. Thammuz pointed directly overhead. Rimmon nodded curt thanks and began to figure rapidly on the lizard's back. Gradually his hand moved slower. By the time Braugh had helpfully placed the bundle of wood on the altar, Rimmon was holding the lizard by the tail, gawping at his notations with a look of sickly wonder. Finally he shoved the lizard under the wood pile. Instantly it caught fire.

Rimmon said: "Salamander. Not bad, eh?" and swaggered off.

Dagon screamed: "Pyromancy!" and ran to the flames. He stuck his nose within an inch of the fire and mumbled rapidly in a long, droning whisper. Belial fidgeted uneasily and muttered to Thammuz: "Last time he tried that he fell asleep."

The droning faded out and Dagon, eyes blissfully closed, fell forward into the crackling flames.

"Did it again!" Belial snapped irritably.

They ran up and dragged Dagon out of the flames. After they had slapped his face awhile, his whiskers stopped burning. Thammuz sniffed the stench of burned hair, then pointed overhead to the drifting smoke.

"Capnomancy!" he said. "It can't fail. We'll find out what this thing is yet!"

All four joined hands and danced around the rising smoke cloud, puffing at it with little pursed lips. Eventually the smoke disappeared. Thammuz gave a sour look and said: "It failed."

There was a dead silence and all glared angrily at Braugh. He endured it about as long as he

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could, then he said: "What's up, lads? Anything wrong?"

"It wants to know if anything's wrong," Belial sneered.

"Deceitful thing!" said Dagon.

"Not at all," Braugh said. "I'm not hiding anything. Of course I don't believe a particle of what's happening here, but that don't matter."

"Don't matter! What d'you mean, you don't believe?"

"Why," Braugh said, "you can't make me believe that you charlatans have anything to do with truth —much less His Black Majesty, Father Satan."

"Anything to do with— Why, you blasted booby, *we're Satan—*"

A second later they looked scared, lowered their voices and added: "So to speak."

Belial glanced around uneasily and said to unseen ears: "No offense—"

"Merely referring to power of attorney," Dagon trembled.

"I see," Braugh said. "And how, exactly, am I deceiving you?"

"How? We'll tell you how! You've got a devil with you that obstructs official divination. You're a cacodaemon or maybe a barghest or an ouphe or an incubus. But we'll get to the heart of the matter. We'll ferret you out. We'll track you down. We'll make you talk. Bring on the iron!"

Well, Braugh thought, what's all this? Bring on the iron. Sounds like dancing girls.

Dagon trundled out a little wheelbarrow filled with lumps of iron. To Braugh he said: "Take one—any one." Braugh picked up a heavy lump of blue-gray metal and handed it to Dagon, who snatched it from him irritably and plunked it into a small vat. He placed the vat over the fire and got a pair of bellows which he pumped energetically into the flames. The iron heated white-hot. They nipped it out with pincers and waved it over Braugh's head, chanting: "Sideromancy! Sideromancy! Sideromancy!"

After a while, Dagon said: "No soap."

"Let's try Molybdomancy," Belial suggested.

They dropped the iron into a pot of solid lead. It hissed and fumed as though it had been dropped into cold water. Presently the lead melted. Belial tipped the pot over and the silvery liquid streamed slowly across the floor.

"Lead, lead, beautiful lead!" chanted Rimmon. "Tell us the story of this creature. Is it a man? Is it a—"

A crack, loud and sharp as a pistol shot, answered him. One of the floor tiles shattered to pieces, the lead dropped with a gurgle, and the next instant a fountain of water hissed and spurted up through the hole.

Belial said: "We busted the pipes again."

"Pegomancy!" Dagon cried eagerly. He approached the fountain with a reverent look, knelt before it and began to drone. In thirty seconds his eyes closed rapturously and he fell forward into the water. They dragged him back and wrung out his beard.

"Got to get him dry," Thammuz said hastily. "He'll catch his death. Get him over to the fire."

Taking Dagon by each arm, Thammuz and Belial ran him over to the altar fire. They circled the bright blaze once, and as they were about to stop, Dagon choked: "Keep me moving. We'll try Gyromancy. There's got to be some answer to what that thing is!"

They made another circle while Dagon muttered: "Hubble-ka-bubble-ka-hubble-ka-bubble—"

Suddenly Rimmon, who was squatting over the broken tile, paddling ineffectually at the flood, stopped and said: "Oi!"

The others stopped, too, and said: "Oi!"

Braugh turned.

A girl had just entered the door. She was short, red-headed, and delightfully the right side of plump. Her copper hair was done up on top of her head. She was breathing with indignant short breaths that made her look as though she would shake to pieces. She wore an expression of utter exasperation and nothing else.

"So!" she rapped out. "At it again!"

No answer. Much quartet trembling.

"How many times—" she began, then stopped and bit her lip. Abruptly she ran to the wall, seized a prodigious glass retort and hurled it straight and true. When the pieces stopped falling, she said: "How many times have I told you to cut out this nonsense or I'd report you!"

"N-nonsense?" quavered Belial. He tried to stanch his bleeding cuts and attempted an innocent smile. "Why Astarte, wh-what d'you m-mean?"

"You know damned well what I mean! I will not have you smashing my ceiling, dripping things down on my office. First molten lead—then water. Four weeks work ruined. My new Sheraton desk ruined!" She hitched around and exhibited a long red sear that ran straight down from shoulder to hip. "Twelve inches of skin—ruined!"

Belial went: *"Tsk-tsk!"*

Braugh went: "My-my!"

The red-headed Astarte turned on him and lanced him with level green eyes. "Who's this?"

"We don't know," Belial began eagerly in an effort to change the subject. "That's why we were . . . er— Well, it just walked up to my desk, and . . . and that's all."

As Braugh stepped forward he heard Rimmon whisper: "Might try Parthenomancy . . . that is, if Astarte is—"

Then he took the girl's hand and said: "The name is Braugh. Christian Braugh."

Her hand was cool and firm. She said: "The name is Astarte. I, too, am a Christian."

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"Satan's crew Christians?"

"Why not?"

There was no answer to that. He said: "Is there some place where we can get away from these Zanies?"

"There's always my office."

"I like offices."

And he also liked Astarte. She ushered him into her place, on the floor below, swept a pile of papers and books off a chair, and casually invited him to sit down. Then she sprawled before the ruin of her desk and after one malevolent glance at the ceiling, listened to his story.

"As I get this," she said, "you're looking for Satan. Evil Lord of the Universe. Well, this is the only hell there is, and ours is the only Satan there is. You're in the right place."

Braugh was perplexed. "Hell?" he inquired. "Fire, brimstone, and so forth?"

"These are the business offices," she explained. "If you're looking for torments—"

"No," Braugh interrupted hastily. "I thank you. No torments."

She smiled at his solemn face and went on: "All this brings us to something rather vital. Just how did you get here? Dead?"

Braugh shook his head.

"Hm-m-m—" She made an interested survey. "You'll bear more looking into. I've never had anything to do with the live ones. You *are* alive, aren't you?"

"Very much so."

"And what business have you with Father Satan?"

"The truth," Braugh said. "I was granted a wish. I wished to discover the truth of all. I was sent here. Why Father Satan, as you call him, should be official purveyor of the truth rather than —" He hesitated, then delicately indicated heaven. "I don't know. But to me the truth is worth any price, so I should like very much to have an interview."

Astarte rapped glittering nails on the desk and smiled broadly. "This," she said, "is going to be delicious!" She arose, flung open the door of her office and pointed down the corridor. "Straight ahead," said Astarte, "then turn to the left. Keep on and you can't miss."

"I'll see you again?" Braugh asked as he set off.

"You'll see me again," Astarte laughed.

This, Braugh thought as he trudged along the corridor, is all too ridiculous. You pass a veil intending to seek the Citadel of the Truth. You are entertained by four ridiculous creatures and by a red-head goddess. You ask to see the Knower of All Things and discover Him to be Satan rather than God. Then off you go down a musty corridor, turn left and then straight ahead.

What of this yearning of mine? What of these truths I seek? Is there no solemnity, no dignity anywhere? Is not Satan a fearful, thunderous deity? Why all this low comedy—this saturnalian air of slapstick that pervades the Underworld Offices of Satan?

He turned the corner to the left and kept on. The short hall ended abruptly in a pair of green baize doors. Almost timidly Braugh pushed them open and to his great relief found himself merely entering an open stone bridge—rather like the Bridge of Sighs, he thought. Around him was nothing but that same sulphurous mist. Behind him was the giant façade of the building he had just left—a wall of brimstone blocks. Before him was a smallish building shaped like a globe.

He stepped quickly across the bridge, for those misty depths on either side of him made him queasy. He paused only a moment before a second pair of baize doors to gather his courage, then tried to smile and pushed them in. You do not, he muttered to himself, come before Satan with a smirk in your heart; but there is an air of general insanity in hell that has touched me.

It was a large office—a kind of file room, and for the second time Braugh was relieved at having put the awesome moment a little further into the future. The office was round as a planetarium and was filled with the largest and most complicated adding machine Braugh had ever seen in his life. The thing was all keyboard. A long platform before the banks of keys buckled and creaked like a painter's scaffolding as a dried-out little clerk wearing glasses the size of binoculars rushed up and back, punching keys with lightning speed.

More as an excuse to put off the meeting than anything else, Braugh watched the little old man scurry before those keys, punching them so rapidly they chattered like a dozen stuttering motors. This little old chap, Braugh thought, has probably put in an eternity figuring out sin totals and death totals and all sorts of statistical totals. He looks like a total himself.

Aloud, Braugh called: "Hello, there!"

Without wavering, the clerk said: "What is it?" His voice was drier than his skin.

Braugh said: "Those figures can wait a moment, can't they?"

"Sorry," said the little old man. He bustled down the scaffolding on a mad run.

"Will you stop a moment!" Braugh shouted.

The clerk paused and turned, removing the enormous binoculars very slowly.

"Now—that's better," Braugh said. "See here, my man, I'd like to get in to see Satan. His Black Majesty, Satan—"

"That's me," said the little man.

Braugh said: "G-Gug—"

For a fleeting instant the dried-out face flick-

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ered into a smile. "Yes, that's me, son. I'm Satan."

And, despite all his imagination, Braugh had to believe.

He slumped down on the lowermost tread of the steps that led up to the scaffold. Satan chuckled faintly and touched a clutch on the gigantic adding machine. Instantly there was a click of gears and with the sound of free-wheeling the machine began to cluck softly like a contented hen.

His Diabolic Majesty came creaking down the stairs and seated himself alongside Braugh. He took out an old silk handkerchief and began polishing his glasses. He was just a nice little old man sitting friendlylike alongside Braugh. At last he said: "What's on your mind, son?"

"W-well, Satan—" Braugh began.

"You can call me Father, son."

"B-but why should I? I mean—" Braugh broke off in embarrassment.

"Well now, son, I guess you're a little worried about that heaven-and-hell business, eh?"

Braugh nodded.

Satan clicked his tongue and shook his head dubiously. "Don't know what to do about that," he said. "Fact is, son, it's all the same thing. Naturally I let it get around in certain quarters that there's two places. Got to, to keep certain folks on their toes. But the fact is, it's not really so. I'm all there is, son. God or Satan or Siva or Official Co-ordinator or Nature—or whatever you want to call it."

With a sudden rush of good feeling toward this friendly old man, Braugh said: "I call you a fine old man!"

"Well—that's nice of you, son. Glad you feel that way. You understand, of course, that we couldn't let everyone see me that way. Might instill disrespect."

"Y-yes, sir, I see."

"Got to have efficiency." The little old man went: *Tsk!* and shook his head. "Got to frighten folks now and then. Got to have respect, you understand. Can't run things without respect."

"Yes, sir."

"Got to have efficiency. Can't be running things all day long, all year long, all eternity long, without efficiency. Can't have efficiency without respect."

Again Braugh said: "Yes, sir—" While within him a hideous uncertainty grew. This was a nice old man—but this was also a maudlin old man. His Satanic Majesty was a tired creature much duller and not nearly so clever as Christian Braugh.

"What I always say," the old man went on, rubbing his knee reflectively, "is that love and all that—you can have 'em. They're nice, of course, but I'll take efficiency any time. Yes, indeed . . . any time . . . leastways, for a body in my position. Now then, son, what was on your mind?"

Mediocrity, Braugh thought grimly. He said: "The Truth, Father Satan. I came seeking the truth."

"And what do you want with the truth, Christian?"

"I just want to know it, Father Satan. I came seeking it. Want to know why we are, why we live, why we yearn— I want to know all that."

"Well, now"—the old man chuckled—"that's quite an order, son. Yes, sir, quite an order indeed."

"Can you tell me, Father Satan?"

"A little, son, just a little. What was it you wanted to know mostly?"

"What there is inside of us that makes us seek the unattainable!" Braugh cried with passion. "What are those forces that pull and tug and surge within us? What is this ego of mine that gives me no rest, that seeks no rest, that frets at turbulence and yet seeks nothing but turbulence. What is all this?"

"Why," the old man said, pointing to his adding machine. "It's that gadget over there. It runs everything."

"That!"

"Yes. That."

"It runs everything?"

"Everything that I run—and I run everything there is." The old man chuckled again, then held out the binoculars. "You're an unusual boy, Christian. First person that ever said a kind word for old Father Satan. First person that ever had the decency to pay the old man a visit. I'll return the favor. Here!"

Wondering, Braugh accepted the glasses.

"Put 'em on," said the old man.

And then the wonder began, for as Braugh slipped the glasses over his head he found himself peering with the eyes of the universe at all the universe. And the adding machine was no longer a machine, but a vastly complex marionetteers crossbar from which an infinit of shimmering silver threads descended.

And with his all-seeing eyes, with the spectacles of Satan, Braugh perceived how each thread attached itself to the nape of the neck of a creature and how each living entity danced the dance of life to the tune of Father Satan's efficient machine.

Wondering, he stumbled up to the scaffold and reached toward the banks of keys. One key he pressed and on a pale planet a creature hungered and killed. A second key and it felt remorse. A third, and it forgot. A fourth, and half a continent away another entity arose five minutes early and so began a chain of events that culminated in discovery and hideous punishment for the murderer.

Slowly Braugh backed away from the adding

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machine and in a kind of horror slipped the glasses up to his brow. The machine went on clucking, and only vaguely did he note that the meticulous chronometer on the wall had ticked away a space of three months' time.

"This," he thought, "is ghastliest of all. We were puppets. We danced the dance of death in life, for we were little better than dead things hung from a string. Up here an old man, not overly intelligent, clicks a few keys, and down there we dance on our strings and take it for a thousand things—for fate, for free will, for Karma, for evolution, for nature, for a thousand false things.

"And none of us knew or knows or will care to know the truth—that there is neither reason, nor beauty, nor sanity to life. That all our mysterious yearning is the push of a decrepit finger on a tab. Oh—it's a bitter thing, this sour discovery. It's a bitter thing always to yearn after truth and find it to be shoddy!"

He glanced down. Old Father Satan was still seated on the steps, but his head slumped a little to one side, his eyes were half closed and he murmured indistinctly about work and rest and not enough of it.

"You're a good boy, Christian," the old man mumbled, "a good boy—"

And revolt stirred in Braugh. "This isn't fair!" he cried. "Father Satan!"

"Yes, my boy?" The old man roused himself slightly.

"This is true? We all dance to your key-tapping?"

"All of you, my boy. All of you."

"And although we think we are free, yet we dance to your tune?"

"You all think yourselves free, Christian, and yet you all dance to Father Satan's playing."

"Then, Father, grant me one thing—one very small thing. There is in a small corner of your mighty kingdom a very tiny planet . . . a very insignificant speck called the Earth—"

"Earth? Earth? Can't say I recollect it offhand, son, but I could look it up."

"No, don't bother, Father Satan. It's there. Only grant me this favor—break the cords that

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bind it. Let it go free!"

"Now, son, don't be foolish. I can't do that."

"In all your kingdom," Braugh pleaded, "there are souls too numerous to count. There are suns and planets too vast to measure. Surely this one tiny bit of dust with its paltry few people— You who own so much can surely part with so little!"

"No, my boy, couldn't do it. Sorry—"

"You who alone knows freedom," Braugh cried. "Would you deny it to others?"

But the Co-ordinator of All slumbered.

"This, then, is His Satanic Majesty," Braugh thought. "This likable, simple old man is the one free agent in an entire cosmos. This is the answer to my seeking, and behold, the answer sleeps!"

Braugh grimly slipped the glasses back over his eyes. Let him slumber then, while Braugh, Satan pro tem, takes over. Oh, we shall be repaid for this disappointment. We shall have a giddy time writing novels in flesh and blood! And perhaps, if we can find the cord that leads to my neck and search out the proper key in all these billions, we may do something to free Christian Braugh!

He turned from the keyboard and craned his head over his shoulder, and even as his eyes searched, he stopped short, stunned, transfixed. His eyes ran up, then down, then up again. His hands began to tremble, then his arms, and finally his whole body shuddered uncontrollably. For the first time in his life he began to laugh, and the hysterical peals rang through the vast-domed room.

And Father Satan awoke and cried anxiously: "Christian! What is it? What is this laughter?"

Laughter of frustration? Laughter of relief? Laughter of promise? He could not tell as he shook at the sight of that slender tendril that stretched from the nape of Satan's neck and turned him, too, in a capering puppet. A silver thread that stretched upward into the infinite heights toward some other vaster machine hidden in the still unknowable reaches of the cosmos—

The blessedly unknowable cosmos.

V.

Now in the beginning all was darkness. There was neither land nor sea nor sky nor the circling stars. There was nothing. Then came Yaldabaoth and rent the light from the darkness. And the darkness He gathered up and formed into the night and the skies. And the light He gathered up and formed into the Sun and the stars. Then from the flesh of His flesh and the blood of His blood did Yaldabaoth form the earth and all things upon it.

But the children of Yaldabaoth were new and green to living and unlearned, and the race did not bear fruit. And as the children of Yaldabaoth diminished in numbers they cried out unto their Lord: "Grant us a sign, Great God, that we may know how to increase and multiply! Grant us a sign, O Lord, that Thy good and mighty race may not perish from Thine earth!"

And Lo, Yaldabaoth withdrew himself from the face of his importunate people and they were sore at heart and sinful, thinking their Lord had forsaken them. And their paths were the paths of evil until a prophet arose whose name was Maart. Then did Maart gather the children of Yaldabaoth around him and spoke to them, saying: "Evil are thy ways, O people of Yaldabaoth, to doubt thy God. For He has given a sign of faith unto you."

Then gave they answer, saying: "Where is this sign?"

And Maart went into the high mountains and with him was a vast concourse of people. Nine days and nine nights did they travel even unto the peak of Mount Sinar. And at the crest of Mount Sinar all were struck with wonder and fell to their knees, crying: "Great is God! Great are His works!"

For Lo, before them blazed a mighty curtain of fire.

Book of Maart; XIII: 29-37.

Pass the veil toward what reality? There's no sense trying to make up my mind. I cannot. God knows, that's been the agony of living for me—trying to make up my mind. How can I when I've felt nothing . . . when nothing's touched me—ever! Take this or take that. Take coffee or tea. Buy the black gown or the silver. Marry Lord Buckley or live with Freddy Witherton. Let Finchley make love to me or stop posing for him. No—there's no sense even trying.

How it glitters in the doorway. Like silk moiré or rainbow lamé. There goes Sidra. Passed through as though nothing was there. Doesn't seem to hurt. That's good. God knows I could stand anything except being hurt. No one left but Bob and myself—and he doesn't seem to be in any hurry. My turn now, I suppose. But where to?

To nowhere?

Yes—that's it. To nowhere!

In this world I'm leaving there's never been any place for me. There was nothing I could do; nothing I ever wanted to do. The world wanted nothing from me but my beauty. It had no need of me. Nothing but to pose naked while near-sighted little men smudged pictures on canvas.

I want to be useful. I want to belong. Perhaps if I belonged—if living had some purpose for me, this lump of ice in my heart might melt. I could learn to feel things—enjoy things. Even learn to fall in love.

Yes—I'm going to nowhere.

Let the reality that needs me, that wants me, that can use me . . . let that reality have me and call me to itself. For if I must choose, I know

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I shall choose wrong again. And if I am not wanted . . . anywhere; if I go through to wander forever in blank time and space . . . still am I better off.

Take me, you who want me and need me!

How cool the veil . . . like scented sprays caressing the skin.

And even as the multitude knelt in prayer, Maart cried aloud: "Rise, ye children of Yaldabaoth, and behold!"

Then did all arise and were struck dumb and trembled. For through the curtain of fire stepped a beast that chilled the hearts of all. To the height of eight cubits it stood and its skin was pink and white as nacre. The hair of its head was yellow and its body was long and curving like unto a sickly tree. And all was covered with slack folds of white fur.

Book of Maart; XIII: 38-39.

God in Heaven!

Is this the reality that called me? This the reality that needs me?

That scarlet sun . . . so high . . . with its blood-red evil eye. Mountaintops . . . like pain-racked titans. Towering mounds of gray slime— The scabrous sheen of valley floors— The pervading sickroom stench of fetid ruination—

And those monstrous creatures crowding around me—like gorillas made of black, rotting coal. Not animal, not human. As though man had fashioned beasts not too well—or beasts had fashioned men still worse. They have a familiar look to them, these monstrosities. The landscape has a familiar look. Somewhere I have seen all this before. Somehow I have been here before. In dreams of death— Yes—

This is a reality of death and twisted shadows.

Again the multitude cried out: "Glory to Yaldabaoth!" and at the sound of the sacred name, the beast turned toward the curtain of flames whence it had come. And Behold! The curtain was gone.

Book of Maart; XIII: 40.

No retreat?

No way out?

No way back to sanity?

But it was behind me a second ago, the veil! No escape— Listen to the sounds they make. The swilling of swine in muck. This can't be real. No reality was ever so horrible. This is all a ghastly trick. Like the one we played on Lady Sutton. I'm in the shelter now. Bob Peel's given us a new kind of hashish or opium— I'm lying on the couch dreaming and groaning. Presently I'll be awake— Before they come any closer—

I must awaken!

With a loud and piercing cry, the beast of the fire ran through the multitude. Through all the gathered thousands it ran and thundered down the mountainside. And the shrill sound of its cries was as the brazen clangor of beaten shields.

And as it passed under the low boughs of the mountain trees, the children of Yaldabaoth cried out in new alarm; for the beast shed its white furred hide in a manner horrible to behold. And the skin remained clinging to the trees. And the beast ran farther, a hideous pink-and-white thing.

Book of Maart; XIII: 41-43.

Quick! Quick! Run through them before they clutch me. Down the mountainside! If this is a nightmare, running will awaken me. If this is reality— But it can't be. That so cruel a thing should happen to me— Were the gods jealous of my beauty? Jealous of the pride I took in my beauty? No. The gods are never jealous.

My dressing gown!

Gone.

No time to go back for it. Run naked, then— Listen to them howl at me— Raven at me. Down! Down! Quickly and down. This rotten soft offal earth sucks my feet like a leech's mouth. Like the pulsating tendrils of an octopus.

They're following.

Why can't I wake up?

My breath—like knives in my chest that dance quickstep of cutting torture.

Why can't I wake up?

Close! I hear them. Close!

WHY CAN'T I WAKE UP?

And Maart cried aloud: "Take you this beast for an offering to our Lord Yaldabaoth!"

Then did the multitude raise stout courage and gird its loins. With clubs and stones all pursued the beast down the jagged slopes of Mount Sinar, chanting the name of the Lord.

And on a small plateau stout warriors pursued it until a shrewdly thrown stone brought the beast to its knees, still screaming in a manner horrible to hear. Then did the warriors smite it many times with strong clubs until at last the cries ceased and the beast was still. And out of the pink-and-white carcass oozed a fetid red matter that sickened all who beheld it.

But when the beast was brought to the High Temple of Yaldabaoth and placed in a cage before the altar, the cries once more resounded, desecrating the sacred halls. And the High Priests were troubled, saying: "What foul offering is this to place before Yaldabaoth, Lord of Gods?"

Book of Maart; XIII: 44-47.

Pain.

Like burning and scalding.

Can't move.

No dream was ever so long—so real. This, then,

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is real, all real. And I, too, am real. A stranger in a reality of filth and horror and torture. My beauty— But why? Why? Why?

My head—still ringing. It feels twisted. It itches inside. I want to scratch it.

This is torture, and somewhere . . . some place — I have heard that word before. Torture. It has a pleasant sound. Torture. The sound of a madrigal; the name of a boat; the title of a prince. Prince Torture.

So light in my head. Great lights and blinding sounds that come and go and have no meaning.

Once upon a time I torture a man—they say.

His name was?

Finchley? Yes. Digby Finchley.

Digby Finchley, they say, loved a pink ice goddess named Theone Dubedat—they say.

The pink ice goddess.

Where is she now?

And while the beast did moan malicious spells upon the altar steps, the Sanhedrin of Priests held council, and to the council came Maart, saying: "O ye priests of Yaldabaoth, raise up your hearts and voices in praise of our Lord. For He was displeased with us and turned His face away. And Lo, a sacrifice has been vouchsafed unto us that we may make our peace with Him."

Then spoke the High Priest, saying: "How now, Maart? Do ye say that this is a sacrifice for our Lord?"

And Maart spoke: "Yea. For it is a beast of fire. It was born of the fire and through fire it shall return whence it came."

And the High Priest said: "Is this offering seemingly in the sight of Yaldabaoth?"

And Maart spoke, saying: "All things are from Yaldabaoth. Therefore are all things good in His sight. Perchance through this strange offering Yaldabaoth will grant us a sign that His people may not vanish from the earth. Let the beast be offered."

Then did the priests agree, for they, too, were sore afraid lest the children of the Lord be no more.

Book of Maart; XIII: 48-54.

See the pretty monkeys dance.

They dance around and around and around.

And they snort.

Almost like speaking.

Almost like— I must stop the singing in my head. The ring-ring-singing. Like the days when Dig was working hard and I would take those difficult poses and hold them for hour after hour with maybe five minutes' time out and I would get dizzy sometimes and reel off the dais and Dig would drop his palette in fright and come running with those big solemn eyes of his ready to cry.

And I knew he loved me and I wanted to love him, but I had no need then. I had no need of anything but finding myself. Now I'm found. This is me. Now I have a need and an ache and a loneliness deep, deep inside for Dig and his love. To see him all eyes and fright at the fainting spells and dancing around me with a cup of tea.

Dancing—dancing—dancing—

And thumping their chests and grunting and thumping.

And when they grunt the spittle drools and gleams on their yellow fangs. And those seven with the rotting shreds of cloth across their chests.

See the pretty monkeys dance.

They dance around and around and around—

So it came to pass that the high holiday of Yaldabaoth was nigh. And on that day did the priests throw wide the portals of the temple and the hosts of the children of Yaldabaoth did enter. Then did the priests remove the beast from the cage and drag it to the altar. Each of four priests held a limb and spread the beast wide across the altar stone, and the beast screamed again with evil, blasphemous sounds.

Then cried Maart: "Rend this thing to pieces that the smell of its evil death may rise to please the nostrils of Yaldabaoth!"

And the four priests, strong and holy, put powerful hands to the limbs of the beast so that its struggles were wondrous to behold; and the light of evil on its hideous hide struck terror into all.

And as Maart lit the altar fires, a great trembling shook the earth.

Book of Maart; XIII: 55-59.

Digby, come to me!

Digby—wherever you are—come to me!

Digby, I need you.

This is Theone.

Theone.

The pink ice goddess.

No longer pink ice, Digby.

Digby, I can't stay sane much longer.

Wheels whirl faster in my head.

Faster and faster.

Digby, come to me.

I need you.

Torture—

Then did the vaults of the temple split asunder with a thunderous roar, and all that were gathered there quailed and their bowels were as water. And all beheld the glittering image of the Lord, Yaldabaoth, descend from pitch-black skies to the temple. Yea, to the very altar itself.

For the space of an eternity did the Lord God Yaldabaoth gaze at the beast of the fire and the beast snarled and writhed, helpless in its evil.

Book of Maart; XIII: 59-60.

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It is the final horror—the final torture.

This monstrosity that floats down from the heavens.

This hideous apelike, manlike, bestial thing.

It is the final jest that it should float down like the ephemera, like a thing of fluff, a thing of lightness and joy. A monster on wings of light. A monster that stands like a rotting corpse with its twisted legs and twisted arms and the shaggy, loathsome body. A monster with the head of a man that looks torn and broken, smashed and ravaged. With those great saucer eyes—

Eyes? Where have I—

THOSE EYES!

This isn't madness. No. I know those eyes—those great, solemn eyes. I've seen them before. Years ago. Minutes ago. Great, solemn eyes filled with hopeless love and adoration.

No—let me be wrong.

Those big, solemn eyes of his ready to cry.

No, not Digby. It can't be. Please—

That's where I've seen this scene before, seen these creatures and the landscape—Digby's drawings. Those monstrous pictures he drew.

But why does he look like that? Why is he rotten and loathsome like the others—like his pictures?

This is your reality, Digby? Did you call me? Need me? Want me?

Digby!

Why don't you listen to me? Why do you look at me that way, like a mad thing when only a minute ago you walked up and back the length of the shelter and finally darted through the veil toward—

And with a voice like unto shattering mountains, the Lord Yaldabaoth spoke to His people, saying: "Now praise ye the Lord, my children, for one has been sent unto you to be thy queen and consort to thy God."

With one voice the multitude cried out: "Praise the Lord, Yaldabaoth!"

And Maart groveled before the Lord and spoke, saying: "A sign to Thy children, O Lord, that they may increase and multiply!"

Then the Lord God reached out to the beast and touched it, raising it with both hands from the altar fires. And behold! The evil cried out for the last time and fled the body of the beast, leaving only a pleasant song in its place. And the Lord spoke unto Maart, saying: "Lo, I will give you a sign."

Book of Maart; XIII: 60-63.

Let me die.

Let me die.

Let me not see and not hear and not feel the—

The?

Pretty monkeys that dance around and around and around while the great, solemn eyes stare into my soul, and Digby, the darling, touches me with hands so strangely changed.

Changed by the turpentine, perhaps, or the ochre or the bice green or Vandyke brown or burnt umber or sepia or chrome yellow which always seemed to stain his fingers each time he put down the brush.

How good to be loved by Digby. How warm and comforting to be loved and to be needed to want one alone in all the millions and to find him so strangely walking in a reality like that of when Sutton Castle can't see and I really knew that the cliffs down which I ran so funny so funny so funny so funny so funny—

Then did the children of Yaldabaoth take the sign of the Lord to their hearts, and Lo, thenceforward did they increase and multiply, forever chanting the praise of their Lord and His Consort on high.

Thus ends the Book of Maart.

VI.

Exactly at the moment when he entered the veil, Peel paused in astonishment. He had not yet made up his mind. To him, a man of utter objectivity and absolute logic, this was an amazing thing. It was the first time in all his life that he had not made a decision with trigger speed. It was the final proof of how violently the Thing in the shelter had shocked him.

He stood where he was and took stock. He was sheathed in a mist of fire that flamed like an opal and was far thicker than any veil should be. It was not beautiful to Peel, but it was interesting. The color dispersion was wide and embraced hundreds of fine gradations of the visible spectrum. He could identify more than a score by name.

With the little data he had at hand he judged that he was standing somewhere either outside time and space or between dimensions. Evidently the Thing in the shelter had placed all of them en rapport with the matrix of existence so that the mere intent as they entered the veil could govern the direction they would take on emergence. In other words—would direct the time and space into which they would step. The veil was more or less a pivot that could spin them into any desired existence.

Which brought Peel to the matter of his own choice. Carefully he considered, weighed and balanced accounts. So far he was satisfied with the life he led. He had plenty of money, a remunerative profession as consultant engineer, a lovely house, an attractive wife. To give all this up in reliance on the vague promises of an invisible donor would be sheer idiocy. Peel had learned never to make a change without good and suffi-

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cient reason. There was neither good nor sufficient reason now.

"I am not," Peel thought coldly, "adventurous by nature. It is not my business to be so. Romance does not attract me, nor does the unknown. I know that I like to keep what I have. Perhaps I am overly fond of keeping. The acquisitive instinct is strong in me and I am not ashamed to be a possessive man. Acquisitiveness has brought me wealth and success. Now I want to keep what I have. There can be no other decision for me. Let the others have their romance— I keep my world precisely as it is."

He strode forward firmly, a punctilious, bald, bearded martinet, and emerged into the dungeon corridor of Sutton Castle.

A few feet before him, a little scullery maid in blue and gray was scurrying directly toward him, a tray in her hands. There was a bottle of beer and an enormous sandwich on the tray. At the sound of his step she looked up, stopped short, her eyes widening, then dropped the tray with a crash.

"What the devil—" Peel began, confounded at the sight of her.

"M-Mr. P-Peel!" she squawked. She began to scream: "Help! Murder! Help!"

Peel slapped her sharply. "Will you shut up and tell me what in blazes you're doing down here this time of night—carrying on like this?"

The girl squawked and sputtered. Exactly, Peel noted, like a decapitated hen.

Before he could slap her again he felt the hand on his shoulder. He turned sharply and received another shock to find himself staring into the red, beefy face of a policeman. The man was in uniform and there was a rather eager expression on his heavy face. Peel gaped, then subsided. He realized quite suddenly that he was in the vortex of phenomena. No sense struggling until he understood the tides.

"Na then, sir," the policeman said. "No call ter strike the gel, sir."

Peel made no answer. The sharp needles of his mind plucked at the facts. A maid and a policeman. What were they doing down here?

"If I recollect a'right, sir, I heard the gel call yer by name. Would yer give it again, sir?"

"I'm Robert Peel, you blasted idiot. I'm a guest of Lady Sutton's. What is all this?"

"Mr. Peel!" the policeman cried. "What a piece er luck. I got to take yer into custody, Mr. Peel. Yer under arrest."

"Arrest? You're out of your mind, my man!" Peel stepped back and glanced over the policeman's shoulder. The veil was gone and in its place the door to the shelter yawned wide. The entire place was turned upside down. It looked as though it had just been subjected to a spring cleaning. There was no one inside.

"I must warn yer not ta resist, Mr. Peel."

The girl emitted a wail that verged on another scream.

"See here," Peel snapped irritably, "who the deuce are you? What right do you have to break into a private home and prance around making arrests?"

The policeman waved his hand indignantly. "Name of Jenkins, sir. Sutton Township Force. And I ain't prancin', sir."

"Then you're serious?"

The policeman pointed a majestic finger up the corridor. "Come along, sir."

"Answer me, you blithering idiot! Are you serious?"

"*You* ought ter know, sir," replied the policeman with considerable dignity. "Now come along."

Peel gave it up helplessly and went. He had learned long ago that when one is faced with an incomprehensible situation it is folly to take any action until sufficient data comes to hand. He preceded the policeman up the winding stairs and heard the whimpering scullery maid come after them. So far he still only knew two things. One: Something, somewhere, had happened. Two: The police had taken over. All this was upsetting to say the least, but he would keep his head. He prided himself that no situation ever took him at a loss.

When they emerged from the cellars, Peel received his second surprise. It was broad daylight outside—bright daylight. He glanced at his watch. It read exactly twelve forty. He dropped his wrist and blinked. The unexpected sunlight made him a little ill. The policeman touched his arm and directed him toward the library. Peel immediately marched to the high, sliding doors and pulled them open.

The library was high, long and narrow, with a small balcony running around it just under the ceiling. There was a long trestle table filling the length of the room, and at the far end three figures were seated, silhouetted against the light that streamed through the narrow window. Peel stepped in, vaguely conscious of a second policeman on guard beside the door. His eyes narrowed as he tried to distinguish faces.

While he peered, he listened carefully to the tremendous hubbub of surprise and exclamations that greeted him. He judged that: One: People had been looking for him. Two: He had been missing for some time. Three: No one had ever expected to find him here in Sutton Castle. Four: How did he get back in, anyway? All this from the astonished voices. Then his eyes accommodated to the light.

One of the three was a lanky, angular man with a narrow, graying head and deep-furrowed fea-

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tures. He looked familiar to Peel. The second was short and stout with ridiculously fragile glasses perched on a bulbous nose. The third was a woman, and again Peel was shocked to see that it was his wife. She wore a plaid suit and held a crumpled green felt hat in her lap.

Before he could analyze the data further, the angular man quieted the others and then turned. He said: "Mr. Peel?"

Peel advanced quietly and said: "Yes?"

"I'm Inspector Hoss."

"I thought I recognized you, inspector. We've met before, I believe?"

"We have." Hoss nodded curtly, then indicated the fat man. "This is Dr. Richards."

"How d'you do, doctor—" Peel turned toward Sidra and bowed with a faint air of irony. "Sidra?"

In flat tones she said: "Hello, Robert."

"I'm afraid I'm a little confused by all this," Peel went on amiably. "Things seem to be happening—" This, he knew, was the right talk. Be cautious. Commit yourself to nothing.

"They are," Hoss said grimly.

"Before we go any further, might I inquire the time?"

Hoss was a little taken aback. He said: "It's two o'clock."

"Thank you." Peel held his watch to his ear, then adjusted the hands. "My watch seems to be running, but somewhere it's lost a little time—" While he apparently devoted himself to his wrist watch he examined their expressions minutely. He would have to navigate with exquisite care purely by the light of their countenances until he learned much more.

Then, quite abruptly, Peel forgot his watch and stared at the desk calendar before Hoss. This was like a punch in the ribs. He swallowed and said: "Is that date quite right, inspector?"

Hoss glanced at the calendar, then back at Peel, his eyes widening. "It is, Mr. Peel. Sunday the twenty-third."

His mind screamed: Three days! Impossible.

Easy— Easy— Peel stiffened and controlled himself. Very well. Somewhere he had lost three days—for he had entered the veil Thursday just past midnight. He felt himself beginning to perspire and reached out blindly for a chair. "You'll have to excuse me," he said faintly, and sat down.

Keep cool, you confounded idiot. There's more at stake than three lost days. He lectured to himself in swift silence to give his nerves time to calm. You know you're a match for anyone. People don't know how to think. A man with a logical mind can cope with anything. Wait for more data.

After a moment of silence, Hoss said: "The fact is, Mr. Peel, we've been looking for you these past three days. You disappeared quite suddenly and we thought we knew why. We're rather surprised to find you in the castle. Rather surprised, indeed—"

"Ah? Why?" Careful now. Be careful!

"I should have thought you'd stay as far away from Sutton Castle as possible."

"Again why?" What's happened? Why the police—the suspicion—the guarded tones? What's Sidra doing here sitting like an avenging fury?

"Because, Mr. Peel, you're charged with the willful and intended murder of Lady Sutton."

Shock! Shock! Shock! They piled on one after the other, and still Peel kept hold of himself. The data was coming in a little too explicitly now. He had hesitated in the veil for a few seconds, and those seconds amounted to three days. Lady Sutton was found dead—evidently. He was charged with murder. Still he needed more facts before he spoke. Now, more than ever, he had to steer carefully.

Peel said: "I don't understand. You had better explain."

"Early Friday morning," Hoss began without preamble, "the death of Lady Sutton was reported. Immediate medical examination proved she died of shock. Witnesses' evidence revealed that you had deliberately frightened her with full knowledge of her weak heart and with the express intent so to kill her. That is murder, Mr. Peel."

"It certainly is," Peel answered coldly, "if you can prove it. May I ask whom your witnesses are?"

"Digby Finchley. Christian Braugh. Theone Dubedat, and—" Hoss broke off, coughed and laid the paper aside.

"And Sidra Peel," Peel finished dryly. Again he met his wife's eye and read the venomous expression clearly. "How very choice!"

But the light broke and he understood at last. They had lost their nerve, those quaking swine, and selected him for the scapegoat. Perhaps because of the golden opportunity of his disappearance. Perhaps—and this was more likely—under the malicious aegis of his wife. This would be Sidra's move to get rid of him, humiliate him, drag him through the courts and up to the executioner's dock. This would be Sidra's perfect revenge.

He got to his feet and before Hoss or Richards could interfere, he grasped Sidra by the arm and dragged her to a corner of the library. Over his shoulder he said: "Don't be alarmed, inspector, I only want a word with my wife."

Hoss coughed and called: "It's all right, officer—" and the menacing blue shadow retreated from Peel's elbow and returned to its post at the door.

Sidra tore her arm free and glared up at Peel,

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her face suffused with passion; her lips drawn back slightly, showing the sharp white edges of her teeth.

Peel snapped: "You arranged this."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't stall, Sidra. This was your idea."

"It was your murder," she countered.

"Ah?"

"It was. We saw you do it. We tried to stop you, but we couldn't. We've sworn to it—the four of us."

"And it was all your idea?"

Her eyes flashed: "Yes!"

"Hoss will be interested to hear that."

"He won't."

"What if I tell him?"

"He won't believe you. We're four to one."

"I can pick holes in your story."

"Try!"

"You're well prepared, eh?"

"Braugh is a good writer," she said. "You won't find any flaws in our story."

"So you're getting rid of me, eh? I hang for the murder on your trumped-up evidence. You get the house, my fortune and, best of all, you get rid of me."

She smiled like a cat. "You catch on fast, Robert."

"And this is the reality you asked for? This is what you planned when you went through the veil?"

"What veil?"

"You know what I mean."

"You're mad." She was confused.

"You're lying."

She smashed her knuckles into his face.

"Never mind," Peel said quite loudly, a plan taking shape in his mind, "never mind, Sidra. But if you think you're going to turn me into a scapegoat you're quite mistaken. Yes—quite mistaken."

"Here," Hoss called sharply, "what's all this?"

"He wanted me to bribe the witnesses," Sidra said in a clear voice, walking back to her seat. "I was to offer them ten thousand pounds each."

The doctor grunted: "Cad!"

Hoss said: "Now see here, Peel, we've been—"

"Please, inspector," Peel interrupted. He sauntered up to the desk, his mind clicking rapidly.

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The best defense was a startling offensive. The best time to begin was now. "My wife has just told you a fantastic lie."

"Ha?"

"More than that, inspector, your other witnesses have lied, too. I wish to charge Braugh, Finchley, Miss Dubedat and my wife with the willful murder of Lady Sutton!"

Hoss gasped and started forward, slapping the papers off the table. As the doctor bent to pick them up, Hoss stuttered: "M-my d-dear Peel! Really . . . you know!"

"Don't believe him!" Sidra screamed. "He's lying. He's trying to lie out of it!"

He let her scream, grateful for more time to whip his story into shape. It must be convincing—flawless. The truth was impossible. And who would believe the truth, anyway? What was truth for him was plainly unknown to the others.

"The murder of Lady Sutton," Peel went on smoothly, "was planned and executed by those four persons. I was the only member of the party to demur. You will grant me, inspector, that it sounds far more logical for four persons to commit a murder against the will of one, than one against four. Four could stop one. One could not possibly stand in the way of four."

Hoss nodded, fascinated by Peel's cold logic.

"Moreover, it is far easier for four persons to trump up a false account and swear to it, than for one to outweigh the evidence of four."

Again Hoss nodded.

Sidra beat at Hoss' shoulder and cried shrilly: "He's lying, inspector. If he's telling the truth ask him why he ran away! Ask him where he's been these last three days! Ask him—"

"Unfortunately there's little love lost between my wife and myself," Peel commented dryly. "Her evidence is entirely wishful thinking."

Hoss freed himself and said: "Please . . . Mrs. Peel. I beg you—"

With a graceful gesture, Peel ran sensitive fingers across his crisp beard and mustache. "My story is this," he continued, "the four whom I accuse desired to murder Lady Sutton. Motive? A craving for the ultimate in emotional sensation. They were utterly depraved and degenerate. The only reason I was a part of their devilish clique was to protect my wife as much as possible. On Thursday night I learned of their plans for the first time. I refused to permit them to continue and threatened to reveal all to Lady Sutton. Evidently they were prepared for this. My wine was drugged and I was rendered unconscious. I have a faint recollection of being lifted and carried somewhere by the two men and—that's all I know of the murder."

"My word!" Hoss gasped. The doctor leaned over to him and whispered. Hoss nodded and murmured: "Yes, yes—the tests can come later." He turned to Peel and said: "Please, go on."

So far, Peel thought, so good. Add a little truth to a lie and it makes the whole seem truthful. Now for the rest, he would have to add just enough color to gloss over the rough edges.

"I came to in pitch darkness. I was lying on a stone floor. I heard no sounds, nothing but the ticking of my watch. These dungeon walls are fifteen and twenty feet thick in places so I could not possibly hear anything. When I got to my feet I found I was in a small cavity about ten feet square.

"I realized that I was in some secret cell that was as yet unknown to any but the members of the clique. After an hour's shouting vainly for help and pounding on the wall, an accidental blow of my fist must have touched the proper spring or lever. One section, vastly thick, swung open quite abruptly and I found myself in the passage were I was picked up—"

"He's lying!" Sidra screamed again.

While Hoss calmed her, Peel coolly considered his position. His story was excellent so far. The evidence at hand was sufficiently strong. Sutton Castle was known for its secret passages. His clothes were still rumpled from the framework he had worn to frighten Lady Sutton. There was no known saliva or blood test to show that he had been drugged seventy-two hours previous. His beard and mustache would eliminate the shaving line of attack. So far his logic was excellent.

"That," Peel said quietly, "is my story."

"We note that you plead not guilty, Mr. Peel," Hoss said, "and we note your story and accusation. I confess that your three-day disappearance seemed to incriminate you, but now—" He shrugged. "All we need do is locate this mysterious cell in which you were confined."

Peel was even prepared for this. He said: "You may, and then again you may not. I'm an engineer, you know. I warn you that the only way we may be able to locate the cell is by blasting through the stone, which may only serve to wipe out all traces."

"We'll take that chance."

"That chance may not have to be taken," the little round doctor said.

Hoss turned slowly and gave the doctor a curious glance. Sidra exclaimed. Peel shot a sharp look toward the man. Experience warned him that fat men were always dangerous.

"It was a perfect story, Mr. Peel," the fat doctor said pleasantly, "quite a perfect story. Most entertaining. But really, my dear sir, for an engineer you slipped up quite badly."

"I beg your pardon?" Peel said stiffly, every nerve on guard.

"When you awoke in your cell," the doctor went

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on with a childish smile, "you mentioned that you were in complete darkness and silence. The walls were so thick all you heard was the ticking of your watch. Very colorful. But, alas, proof of a lie. You awoke seventy hours later— *No watch will run seventy hours without rewinding!*"

He was right. Peel realized that at once. He had made a mistake, and there was no going back for alterations. The entire story depended on the wholeness of the fabric. Tear away one thread and the whole thing would ravel. The fat doctor was right—and he was trapped.

One glance at Sidra's malevolent, triumphant face was enough for him. He decided that now was the time for action, and very quick action indeed. He arose from his chair, laughing in obvious defeat. Hoss was gaping again; the doctor chuckling like a pleased puzzle-solver; Sidra gloating. Peel sprinted to the window like a shot, crossed arms before his face, and smashed through the glass pane.

The shattering of the glass and the excited shouts behind him were only vague sounds. Peel limbered his legs as the soft earth came up at him and landed with a jarring shock. It was a fifteen-foot drop, but he took it well. He was on his feet in a trice and running toward the rear of the castle where the cars were parked. Five seconds later he was vaulting into Sidra's roadster. Ten seconds later he was speeding past the high iron gates to the highway outside.

Even in this crisis, Peel thought swiftly and with precision. He had driven out of the grounds too quickly for anyone to note which direction he would take. He turned toward London and sent the car roaring down the road until he came to an abrupt curve. Here he stopped and snatched a hammer from the tool kit.

He smashed every window in the car and the windshield, too. The broken glass he spread evenly across the road. It might not cause a puncture, and then again it might. The loss of time was worth the gamble. He leaped back into the car and started off again toward London. A man could lose himself in a metropolis.

But he was not a man to flee blindly, nor was there panic in his heart. Even as his eyes mechanically followed the road, his mind was sorting through facts, accurately and methodically, and inevitably drawing closer to a stern conclusion. He knew that he could never prove his innocence. The three-day hiatus was the bar to that. He knew he would be pursued as Lady Sutton's murderer.

In war time it would be impossible to get out of the country. It would even be impossible to hide very long. What remained then was an outlaw living in miserable hiding for a few brief months only to be taken and brought to trial. Peel had no intention of giving his wife the satisfaction of watching him dragged through a murder trial.

Still cool, still in full possession of himself, Peel planned as he drove. The audacious thing would be to go straight to his home. They would never think of looking for him there—for a while. At home he would have time enough to do what had to be done. He set his mouth in a thin, straight line.

Rapidly he drove deep into London toward Chelsea Square, a frigid, bearded, bald man at the wheel of the car looking like some icy buccaneer from the past.

He approached the square from the rear, watching for the police. There were none about and the house looked quite calm and inauspicious. But, as he drove into the square and saw the front façade of his home, he was grimly amused to see that an entire wing had been demolished in a bombardment. Evidently the catastrophe had taken place some days previous, for all the rubble was neatly piled and the broken side of the building was fenced off.

So much the better, Peel decided. No doubt the house would be empty. He parked the car, unnoticed by the few people in the street, leaped out and walked briskly to the front door. Now that he had made his decision and formed his plans he was absolutely impassive.

There was no one inside. Peel went to the library, took pen and ink and seated himself at the desk. Carefully, with lawyerlike acumen, he made out a new will cutting his wife off beyond legal impeachment. While the ink was drying, he went to the front door and waited until a couple of laborers trudged by with shovels on their shoulders.

"You there!" Peel called.

They turned weary faces toward him. "Yes, sir?"

"Want to earn a fiver?"

Their faces glowed.

"Step in here a moment."

With many apologies for their muddied boots, they edged into the library, glancing around curiously. Peel sat them down and read the will to them. They listened with open mouths, then witnessed his signature. Laboriously, with much protrusion of tongues, they signed their names and received the bank note. Peel ushered them out and locked the door.

He paused grimly and took a breath. So much for Sidra. It was the old possessive instinct, he knew, that forced him to act this way. He wanted to keep his fortune, even after death. He wanted to keep his honor and dignity, even after death. He had made sure of the first. He would have to perform the second—quickly!

He thought for another moment, then nodded his head decisively and marched back to the kitchen. From the linen closet he took down an armful of sheets and towels and with them padded

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the windows and edges of the doors. As an afterthought, he took a large square of cardboard and on it, with shoe-blacking, printed: DANGER! GAS! He placed it outside the kitchen door.

When the room was sealed tight, Peel went to the stove, opened the oven door and turned the gas cock over. The gas hissed out of the jets, rank and yet cooling. Peel knelt and thrust his head into the oven, breathing with deep, even breaths. It would not, he knew, take very long. It would not be painful.

For the first time in hours, some of the tension left him, and he relaxed almost gratefully, calmly awaiting his death. Although he had lived a hard, geometrically patterned life; and traveled a rigidly realistic road—now his mind reached back toward more tender moments. He regretted nothing; he apologized for nothing; he was ashamed of nothing—and yet he thought of the days when he first met Sidra with a sense of sorrow.

> What slender youth, bedewed with liquid odors,
> Courts thee on roses in some pleasant cave,
> Sidra—

He almost smiled. Those were the lines he wrote to her when, in the romantic beginning, he worshiped her as a goddess of youth, of beauty and goodness. Those had been great days—the days when he had finished at Manchester College and had come to London to build a reputation, a fortune, a life. A thin-haired boy with precise habits and precise thoughts. Dreamily he sauntered through the backwash of memory as though he were recalling an entertaining play.

He came to with a start and realized that he had been kneeling before the oven for twenty minutes. There was something very much awry. He had not forgotten his chemistry and he knew that twenty minutes of illuminating gas should have been sufficient to make him lose consciousness. Perplexed, he got to his feet, rubbing his stiff knees. There was no time for analysis now. The pursuit would be on his neck at any moment.

Neck! That was an idea. Almost as painless as gas. Much quicker!

Peel shut off the oven, took a length of laundry rope from a cupboard and left the kitchen, picking up the sign en route. As he tore up the cardboard, his alert little eyes pried through the house, looking for the proper spot. Yes, there. In the stairwell. He could throw the rope over that beam and stand on the balcony above the stairs. When he leaped, he would have a ten-foot drop to the landing.

He ran up the stairs to the balcony, straddled the railing and carefully threw the rope over the beam. He caught the flying end as it whipped around the beam and swung toward him. He tied it into a loose knot and ran it up the length of the rope until it snuggled tight. After he had yanked twice to tighten the knot, he put his full weight on the rope and swung himself clear of the balcony. The rope supported his weight admirably. There was no chance of its snapping.

When he had climbed back to the railing, he shaped a hangman's noose and slipped it over his head, tightening the knot under his right ear. There was enough slack to give him a six-foot drop. He weighed one hundred fifty pounds. It was just about right to snap his neck clean and painlessly at the end of the drop. Peel poised, took a deep breath, and leaped—

His only thought as he fell was a chaotic attempt to figure how much time he had left to live. Thirty-two feet per second square divided by six gave him almost a fifth of a second. Then there was a blinding jerk that racked his entire body, a dull *crack* that sounded large and blunt in his ears, and a sensation of intolerable pain in his neck.

And for the first time, Peel's iron control was broken.

It took him fully five seconds to realize that he was still alive. He hung by his neck in a kind of horror and slowly understood that he was not dead. The horror crawled over his skin like a wave of chill ants, and for a long time he hung and shuddered, refusing to believe that the impossible had happened. He shuddered while his arms flailed helplessly and the chill reached his mind, numbing it with terrible trepidation.

At last he reached into his pocket and withdrew a penknife. He opened it with difficulty, for his body was slowly turning palsied and unmanageable. After much sawing he at last severed the rope and dropped the last few feet to the landing. While he still crouched, he reached up fingers and felt his neck. It was broken. His head was tilted at an angle that made everything seem topsy-turvy. He could feel the jagged edges of the broken cervical vertibrae. He shuddered again.

As Peel dragged himself up the stairs, he realized that something too ghastly to understand was taking place. There was no attempting a cool appraisal of this; there was no data to be taken, no logic to apply. He reached the top of the stairs and lurched through the bedroom to the bath. In the mirror he examined his twisted neck.

With fumbling hands he groped in the medicine cabinet until he grasped his razor. He closed the cabinet door, then opened the blade, faintly admiring the six inches of gleaming steel. There was promise in the hair-fine, hollow-ground edge. He gripped the handle firmly, tilted his chin back as far as the twisted neck would allow, and with a firm, steady stroke sliced the steel across his throat.

Instantly he was deluged with a great gout of blood, and, as he drew breath, his windpipe was choked. He doubled over, coughing, and his throat

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was lathered with red foam. Still coughing and gasping, with the wind whistling madly through the ragged slit in his neck, Peel slowly crumpled to the tile floor and lay there while the blood gushed with every heartbeat and soaked him through. Yet as he lay there, gasping with little hacking, foaming coughs, he did not lose consciousness.

For the first time in all his life, Peel was afraid—desperately afraid. The agony of his twisted neck was nothing to the agony in his mind. He floundered on the bathroom floor and realized vaguely that life was clinging to him with all the possessiveness with which he had clung to life and the things he owned.

He crawled upright at last, not daring to look at his wax-white, bloodless face in the mirror, nor at the yawning red slash in his throat. The blood—what remained of it—had clotted slightly. He still could breathe normally at times. Gasping and almost completely paralyzed, Peel stumbled back into the bedroom and searched through Sidra's dresser until he found her revolver.

It took all his presence of mind to steady the muzzle at his chest and still his shaking hands. Deliberately, he pumped three shots into his heart. And when the echo of the reports died away and the sharp powder tang lifted, he was still alive, with a great ghastly hole torn in him.

It's the body, he thought crazily. Life clings to the body. So long as there's a body—the merest shell to contain a spark—then life will remain. It possesses me, this life, but there's yet a solution. I'm still enough of an engineer to work out a solution.

That solution, he knew, would have to be absolute disintegration. Let him shatter this body of his to particles—to bits—to a thousand pieces—and there would no longer be the cup of flesh to contain that persistent life. For that he needed explosives, and there was nothing in the house. Nor could he drag himself to his laboratory.

He lurched into his study and removed a deck of washable plastic playing cards from his drawer. For long minutes he cut them to pieces with his desk scissors, until he had a bowlful of minute pieces. He carried them to the bathroom and with the little strength that was left in his shattered body he removed a section of brass pipe from the tap inlet and carried it to his study.

There was a small spirit lamp on his desk, used to keep pots of coffee hot. Peel lit the lamp, placed a dry pot over it on the gimbals and dropped a lead paper weight in. After hours, it seemed, the lead melted. He used half the molten metal to plug one end of the pipe tight.

It took all his remaining energy to return to the bathroom for the forgotten bits of playing cards, but he knew it would be the last trip he would have to make. He rammed the frayed shreds of nitrocellulose into the brass pipe, using a heavy pencil as a ramrod. When the pipe was packed solid, he put in the heads of three matches and sealed the open end with the remaining lead and then placed the end of the pipe directly in the spirit flame.

With a sigh, he drew his desk chair close and hunched before the heating bomb. Nitrocellulose—a powerful-enough explosive when ignited under pressure. It was only a question of time, he knew, before the pipe would burst into violent explosion and scatter him around the room—scatter him in blessed death.

The agony in his chest and neck made him rock gently and sway from side to side. He began to whimper like a child as each individual nerve took up the screaming chorus of pain. The red froth at his throat burst forth anew, while the blood on his clothes caked and hardened.

Slowly the bomb heated.

Slowly the minutes passed.

Slowly the agony increased.

Peel rocked and whimpered, and when he reached out a palsied hand to push the bomb a little closer into the flame, his fingers could not feel the heat. He could see the red-caked flesh scorch and blister, but he felt nothing. All the pain writhed inside him—none outside.

It made noises in his ears, that pain, but even above the blunt sounds he heard the dull tread of footsteps far out in the house. They were coming toward him, slowly and almost with the inexorable tread of fate. Panic struck him at the thought of the police and Sidra's triumph. He tried to coax the spirit flame higher.

The steps passed through the downstairs hall and then began to mount the steps of the stairway. Each steady thud sounded louder and more terrifying. Peel hunched lower and in the dim recesses of his mind began to pray. The steps reached the top of the stairs, turned and advanced on his study. There was a faint whisper as the study door was thrust open. Running hot and cold with pain and fear, Peel refused to turn.

So abruptly that it jarred him, a voice said: "Now then, Bob, what's all this?"

He neither turned nor answered.

"Bob!" the voice called hoarsely, "don't be a fool!"

Vaguely he understood that he had heard that voice somewhere.

Steps sounded again, then a figure stood at his elbow. With bloodless eyes he flicked a frightened glance up. It was Lady Sutton. She still wore the sequined evening gown.

"My hat!" she gasped, her tiny eyes goggling in their casement of flesh, "you've gone and messed yourself up, haven't you!"

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"Go away—" His words were cracked and whistling as half his breath hissed through the slit in his throat. "I will not be haunted."

"Haunted?" Lady Sutton laughed shrilly. "That's a good one, that is."

"Go away," Peel muttered. "You're dead."

"What've you got there?" Lady Sutton inquired in brassy tone. She hesitated for a moment. "Oh, I see; a bomb. Going to blow yourself to bits, eh, Bob?"

His lips formed soundless words. Still he hunched over the heating bomb.

"Here," Lady Sutton said. "Let me—" She reached forward to knock the brass tube off the gimbals. With a convulsive effort Peel struggled to his feet and grasped her arm with clawing hands. She was solid for a ghost. Nevertheless he flung her back.

"Let be!" he wheezed.

"Now stop this, Bob!" Lady Sutton ordered. "I never intended this much misery for you."

Without bothering to puzzle at her words, he struck at her feebly as she tried to get past him to the bomb. She was far too strong for him. He turned quickly and flung himself forward toward the spirit lamp, arms outstretched to infold it and protect it from interference.

Lady Sutton cried: "Bob! You damned fool!"

There was a blinding explosion. It smashed into Peel's face with a flaring white light and a burst of shattering sound. The entire study rocked and a portion of the wall fell away. A heavy shower of books rained down from the jolted shelves. Smoke and dust filled space with a dense cloud.

As the cloud cleared, Lady Sutton still stood alongside the place where the desk had been. For the first time in many years—in many eternities, perhaps, her face wore an expression of sadness. For a long time she stood in silence. At last she shrugged and began to speak.

"Don't you realize, Bob," she said in a low voice, "that you can't kill yourself? The dead only die once, my boy, and you're dead already. You've all been dead for days. How is it that none of you could realize that? Perhaps it was that ego that Braugh spoke of— Perhaps— But you were all dead before you reached the shelter that night. You should have known when you saw your bombed house. That was a heavy raid last Thursday—very heavy."

Slowly she raised her hands and began to unpeel the gown that covered her. In the dead, unnatural silence, the little sequins rustled and tinkled. They glittered as the gown dropped from her body to reveal—nothing. Mere empty space.

"I enjoyed that little murder," she said. "It was amusing—quite amusing to see the dead attempt to kill. That's why I let you go on with it. It was amusing—"

She removed her shoes and stockings. She was now nothing more than arms, shoulders and a gross head in space. Nothing more. The face was still heavy and still wore the slightly sorrowful expression.

"But it was ridiculous trying to murder me," she went on, "seeing who I was. It was even a little ridiculous producing that play. Because, Bob, Astaroth does happen to be a lady—so to speak—and I happen to be Astaroth."

With a sudden motion, the head and arms jerked into the air and then dropped to the floor alongside the heaped-up dress. They clattered dully like waxen figures, and yet the voice continued from the smoke-filled space. Where the dusty mist swirled, it revealed a figure of emptiness—a mere outline in space—a bubble—and yet a figure horrible to behold.

"Yes," the voice went on, softening slightly to a quiet tone, "I am Astaroth, Bob—Astaroth, as old as the ages—as old and bored as eternity itself." It took on a pleading note. "That's why I had to play my little joke on you back in the shelter. I had to turn the tables and have a bit of a laugh. Satan knows, you cry out for a bit of novelty and entertainment after an eternity of arranging hells for the damned! And Satan knows, there's no hell like the hell of boredom—"

The passionate, pleading voice broke off.

And a thousand scattered bloody fragments of Robert Peel heard and understood. A thousand particles, each containing a tortured spark of life, heard the voice of Astaroth and understood.

"Of life I know nothing," Astaroth cried out, "but death I do know—death and justice. I know that each living creature creates its own hell forevermore. What you are now, you have wrought with your own hands. Hear ye all, before I depart—if any of ye can deny this—if any one of you would argue this—if any one of you would cavil at the Justice of Astaroth—let him speak! Speak now!"

Through all the far reaches the voice echoed, and there was no answer.

A thousand pain-thorned particles of Robert Peel heard and made no answer.

Theone Dubedat heard and made no answer.

A questing doubt-crazed Christian Braugh heard and made no answer.

A screaming Sidra Peel heard and made no answer.

A rotting, self-devouring Digby Finchley heard and made no answer.

All the damned of all eternity in an infinity of self-made hells heard and understood and made no answer.

For the Justice of Astaroth is unanswerable.

THE END.

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THE JUMPER

By Theodore Sturgeon

The Nazi prison guard was plain nasty—and something more. The Canadian recognized the symptoms—and made the vicious guard signal the R. A. F. for him!

Illustrated by Kramer

My pilot was annoyed with me, which was understandable, since he was an earnest young man and regretted the substitution of a Canadian medical officer for three fifty-pound bombs. Bombs would do his work over Germany, he reasoned; and they would do it without observing him and his gunner, without making constant notations in a military blank book. But the war office wanted these observations of R. A. F. lads under stress, and to us, the war office was at the top of the heap.

I wasn't subjected to his annoyance long, more's the pity. The youngster guided us skillfully through the black over Europe to within forty miles of our objective and then swallowed a German tracer that puffed in through the cowling. He screamed and threw up his hands, and we went into a dive with benefit of engines. A Me-110 whipped past with a sound for all the world like a mighty belch, and the right auxiliary petrol tank spewed flames all over the fuselage. It all happened bloody fast, and there was nothing to be done, so I went over the wall. Pulling my ripcord a few seconds later, I saw the pale gleam of the gunner's 'chute moving about me in a great circle. That's the way it was, because I couldn't see that I was spinning—and I couldn't see anything but his 'chute, and the meteor that had been a slim blue-gray bomber. It crashed tremendously a couple of minutes later, and the *whump* of the concussion jerked at my shroud lines. The intensity of the dead lad's purpose must have carried him through, for the flaming carcass carried its basket of eggs right into the middle of a crowded railroad yard, as I saw by the flash and the flame.

Then Archy opened up on us, and I thought that was just about the outside edge. Five hundred guineas' worth of H. E. and shrapnel for two men dangling from parachutes. Myself, I might try my aim with an automatic rifle at a Hun in a 'chute. I used to be a pretty fair duck hunter. But shrapnel? Deuced unsporting. I had the nasty feeling that the gunner and I had been reduced to a bet on a bottle of beer between two bored Jerries.

Archy shared half a dozen rounds with us. I was too busy spilling wind out of the silk to see how the other chap made out. He was taking his chances on riding it straight down. I miscalculated my altitude, what with Jerry banging away and all that spilling, and I came down pretty fast. Landed with a bit of a bump and broke both of my legs. The umbrella dragged me cross country because I couldn't roll over, and the jarring compounded one of the fractures. I lay down then, when the silk fouled on a sapling, and wished that the fall had knocked me out. Just by crazy chance, the gunner came down within twenty feet of me. His 'chute seemed to set him down like a thistle seed. The breeze quit and let him fold up gently, but not before I saw that shrapnel had taken his shoulders out from under his head. Then the great white 'chute billowed down over both of us.

They treated us pretty well at the camp. I call it a camp because it's known as a camp to the press, but it was really a castle. Polish. We had the run of two thirds of the place, including a wide garden. Keep your eyes away from the walls and you'd think you were in England, though no Englishman would let his garden run riot the way this one was. This one had been so well planted that it was all the better for its neglect. I used to clump about it after my legs had knit well enough to bear my weight. Jerry had done more than was humanly possible for that right leg. A less skilled medico would have amputated and thereby given me more of a limp but a lot less pain. I suppose it's better to have your own limbs in any condition, but there were times when I didn't think so.

The whole set-up had all the elements of being bearable. They fed us adequately, and anybody can get used to *ersatz* coffee made from tulip bulbs

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and turnip. They allowed us half a dozen Tommies to keep the rooms and mess hall clean, and they were decent about letting packages from home get through. Well, the German military is that way, anyhow. There's a new government in Berlin, a new Germany in men's minds and on the maps; but it hasn't killed the traditionalism of the armed forces. To the Prussian mind, an officer is an officer, be he German, English or Guatemalan, and as such he is entitled to respect and subordination. He may be a prisoner, but if he is, no man without rank may give him orders. The party would like to do something about that, but the party is a little too shrewd to interfere with the military during wartime. Wait till it's over; then the factions will blossom out. Then the army will have its chance to even up a few scores—and it will, it will.

Richter was a party man. Richter had reached the ripe old age of twenty-two and had six devoted and bloody years of party work behind him. At sixteen he had reported his uncle and aunt to the Nazis because they had made some derogatory remarks about the leader. Richter was in an ideal spot to spy on them since they were supporting him. He made it his business to investigate the family of his childhood sweetheart, found that the girl was one eighth Jewish, held the fact over her head until he was tired of her, and then had her sent to a camp equipped with sundry abrasions and a condition associated with so much bitterness that not even mother love would override it. He was a charter member of the *Jugend;* he had worn his brown shirt with pride and plain clothes with poisonous efficiency. He had clung to the *Landwehr* as long as he could, on the theory that his loyal talents were of more use to the party in spying on his associates than in pulling a more honest trigger. He was in the army now, but he had been sent to the prison to check up on its administration; a fact that he made no bones about. He was tall and broad, with rotten teeth and eyes set too close together, and I do believe he bleached his hair.

But he was a private. He used his low rank on German and British officers alike, begging to be disciplined for his insubordinate conduct so that he could send in a lying report to Berlin. He was sly—he clung impeccably to the letter of his Soldier's Manual. But the spirit of it—that was his toy. The Jerries loathed him as only soldiers can loathe political theorists. The English—well, at least they had the freedom of being his admitted enemy.

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I ran afoul of him the very day I first got out of bed. I was sitting in the garden, smoking my pipe, a pair of crutches on one side of me and an R. A. F. flight commander on the other. We were talking quite casually about something he had read when we realized that Richter had pussyfooted up behind us. McCarthy, the flier, went right on talking. "—and that's something I've noticed in all his books," he said. "I have to agree with him. There is nothing on earth quite as revolting as a criminal doing as he pleases under the holy name of patriotism. A man who would do that would report his relatives to the authorities. More—he would eavesdrop on his superiors. Richter," he said without turning, "Captain LaFarge's pipe has gone out. Light it for him like a good chap."

Richter came around where we could see him. He was speechless with rage. Indirection and irony were completely foreign to his malignant mind; they baffled and hurt him.

"I haf not a match," he said stiffly.

"Very well," said McCarthy. "Carry on, then," and he waved the German away. McCarthy gazed after him. He was English—Northumberland—and a brilliant man. He had been a corporation lawyer before the war, and was the kind of soldier that Goebbels tries to teach Germany to disbelieve in. "That creature," said McCarthy softly, "is going to figure prominently in a murder very soon. He'd better see to it that he's the party of the first part."

I laughed loud enough to annoy Richter, for he must know that we were talking about him. "Is he always like that?"

"That, or worse," said McCarthy. He spat. "I don't know if there'll be an exchange so I can get out of here, but if I do, I have a pretty little problem posed for myself. I'm certain that I could find this place from the air. There's an air field not three hundred yards from here—military objective. Knowing that, would I bomb the whole layout on the off-chance of killing all the English here, if I knew I'd get Richter in the process?"

"Hardly," I said. "You *can't* dislike a man so thoroughly that you'd slaughter a hundred of your own to get to him."

"Can't I, though?" He rose. He was a steady sort, and it surprised me to see that his hands were trembling. "You'll find out for yourself soon enough." He glared at the gate through which the Nazi had disappeared, wiped his palms on his trousers. "Well, I'm going to wash up. Dinner in ten minutes, you know."

"I'll be along," I said. He went into the building, and I sat there watching a flight of Me's coming in from the west, watched them circle to get the wind and drop down until the high garden wall concealed them from me. I remember thinking that perhaps McCarthy was letting the prison get the better of him.

Richter came back, with his usual arrogant marching stride. He halted in front of me—I could almost hear a master sergeant yelling, *"Halt! One—two!"* as he did it—and extended a box of matches.

"Oh. Thank you, Richter."

He waited until I had begun to light my pipe, right-faced, and marched back to the castle. On the way he put out his hand, caught up my crutches, dragged them thirty yards away, and dropped them. I called him, furiously, but he apparently did not hear me.

I finished lighting my pipe because there was nothing else I could do. I knew he would be somewhere where he could watch me, ready to enjoy it if I called out for help, for I couldn't move without the crutches. I knew he was praying that I would, rather than call out, crawl in the dirt until I could reach them. So I did neither.

It was a long wait. Because I was just out of the hospital, there was no place set for me at table, and I was not missed until after nightfall. Obermeier found me. He was the prison adjutant.

"Captain LaFarge!"

He floundered through the weeds. "Captain! Why have you not to your room reported?"

"I've been delayed," I said. "If you'll be good enough to fetch me my crutches, I'll go in with you."

He peered at me through the gloom, his fat cheeks shining with sweat. It goes hard with these men if there's a prison break. "Krodges?" He looked up and down the bench.

"Over there," I said. He brought them to me.

"How is this that they are over there the krodges?"

"I must've dropped them. Silly of me, wasn't it?"

He looked carefully all around the dark garden and suddenly sat beside me. "Herr Captain," he whispered, "that Richter—did he—"

"It was what we call a practical joke," I said. "Very funny. If one of the British did it, you can't expect me to tell you his name, can you?" He blinked at me owlishly. "And if it was Richter, I gather that what he wants is a complaint against him for an action to which there were no witnesses. That being what he wants, we'll do otherwise." I climbed to my feet; Obermeier was gentleman enough not to try to help me. "Forget it," I said.

He walked slowly beside me. Finally he said, "If the British like you all are, Germany and England friends is."

"All the British *are* like me," I said.

"This I am not allowed to believe," he grinned, and went inside.

I missed osteomyelitis by a hair, and in a couple of months could navigate by myself. I had a

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lump on one leg and a limp in the other, and one of my ankles was rigid, while the other refused to be. The result was a syncopated shamble in which Richter took the greatest delight. When I was alone in the garden he used to patrol the wall with an automatic rifle, mimicking me. He had mimicry down to a fine art. Not only physical things like my gimpy walk, but Morris' lisp and poor old Ruffing's *tic doloro* and Beauchamp's voice. Richter spoke a regurgitative sort of English, and I had, at times, to admit that his imitations were as clever as they were crass. He was careful; to the prison authorities he was never guilty of anything tangible. To the prisoners he was a torturer and a tyrant.

McCarthy asked me about that one day. "You used to be a psychologist," he said. "What would you call that warp of Richter's?"

"'Warp' is scarcely the right term," I said. "Richter isn't a normal man gone haywire. He's a nicely integrated personality. He's rational, controlled, quite sane. There's no excuse for his ingrained criminality. Nothing causes it—it just growed. It's a little something of his very own."

"I've heard wonderful things about psychoanalysis," said McCarthy thoughtfully. "Couldn't we perhaps—"

"No," I said. "Psychoanalysis isn't the high-speed panacea the novelists would have us believe. A thorough analysis of a fairly normal man takes three years and costs upward of six hundred pounds. It demands a hell of a lot of work, and incidentally, the complete and utterly sincere cooperation of the subject. I can just see Richter giving us that!"

McCarthy pulled at his lip. He was acting rather strangely, I thought, as if he were on the point of laughing uproariously—or screaming. His features were drawn, and he moved stiffly, which was rather odd for a man who had been doing the most bewildering gymnastics only three minutes ago. He was remarkably fit, and a very able tumbler, and he had a routine he used to go through that he called a round-off-back-hand-spring-layout-back-somersault with a full twist, which I assure you was as amazing as it sounds. He moved metrically and gracefully, and the spot he appropriated each evening for these gyrations had become marked with his gymnastic spoor—a depression where his leading hand struck on the round-off, two bare patches in the grass where his feet struck, two lighter ones where his hands touched on the handspring, two sets of footprints marking the somersault. McCarthy was very much a creature of habit.

"Three years!" he said disappointedly. "Isn't there something faster than that?"

"A well-placed blow on the side of the jaw," I said.

McCarthy tossed his head in irritation. "You know he never does his filthy work in close quarters," he said.

"What's he done now?"

In answer he extended the hand he had been holding behind his back. It dripped dark blood. A slender steel spike had entered his palm and was sticking up out of the back of his hand. I took his wrist gently. "Good Lord! What is it?"

"An icepick," he said. "I never saw the damned thing. That's what I get for working out on the same spot of ground every evening. Anyone could tell to a fraction of an inch where my hand would come down. The pick was buried point up right where I was due to hit. It went through my hand and broke off. I was already into the handspring when I felt it, and I imagined I tore it up a little when my hands came down the second time."

I set up a yell for Obermeier and swiftly yanked the pick out of his hand. "Let it bleed free," I said. "The dirty—"

The adjutant took him inside and had him bandaged up. I sat there foaming and wondering why a man with a pick through his hand would come to me and start up a casual conversation about psychoanalysis. Perhaps he was just cold-blooded. More likely he had to say something to somebody before he dropped dead with rage. McCarthy was a peculiar bird.

Down at the end of the garden I could see Richter parolling the top of the wall. He turned toward me, grinned, pulled out a white handkerchief, elaborately bandaged his hand with it, grinned again, and resumed his patrol.

I began to think seriously about whether or not there *was* something faster than psychoanalysis, that you could use on a man who kept out of range of a well-placed blow on the side of the jaw.

You wouldn't think that a creature like Richter could be in any way sensitive, but he was, to an extraordinary degree. Not to any of the humanities, not to music, but to—well, let me tell you how I first noticed it.

He was standing in the corner of the garden wall, leaning casually on his rifle, but so poised that he could club it and kill any prisoner who made a move toward him. He was enjoying himself thoroughly, singing a rasping paraphrase on a popular wartime song—something about "The little old church where England stood." He was enjoying himself hugely. There was no escaping his voice, no ignoring his ingeniously improvised lyrics. We tried loud talking, but it petered out. There was no going inside, out of earshot, for the polite but inflexible prison routine demanded our presence in the garden.

But for once in his life Richter was caught napping. Obermeier came out of the castle and was halfway across the garden before the private saw him.

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"Richter!" barked the adjutant. Richter stopped singing, paled visibly, and dropped his rifle. They stood staring fixedly at each other, arms hanging loosely, legs apart. In German, Obermeier said, "Richter! You are on guard duty, no?"

Richter didn't move.

"When has the army allowed a guard on duty to indulge in light opera?" Obermeier was furious, but his native caution was in high gear. He meticulously avoided any reference to the song, or to Richter's obvious reasons for singing it, knowing that if he did, the party would be informed that he was turning pro-British. He had caught Richter in a petty departure from regulations, and for that alone he was reprimanding him. What astonished me was that Richter did not snap into attention. He mouthed silently when Obermeier spoke, glared unmoving when he ceased.

"Attention!" blasted Obermeier. "What ails you, man?"

Richter's face worked, but he didn't move. Obermeier flushed angrily, opened his mouth to speak, closed it and scratched his neck instead. Then he turned on his heel and started back up the path. And then that astonishing thing happened. Richter started up after him. He was ten yards behind, but he walked step for step with the adjutant. I heard one of the imperials say, "Look at th' blighter! He's aping his own officer now!"

The gravel path took a right-angle turn up near the building. As he reached it, Obermeier called, "Teubner! Rausch!" I assumed he was calling a couple of guards to take care of Richter. And then he turned the corner.

And ten yards behind him, Richter called, "Teubner! Rausch!" in exactly the same tone of voice, exactly as loud, and *exactly at the same time* as Obermeier. So perfectly synchronized were the two voices that the effect was like having two radios playing the same program in the same room. Most of us heard it, for we were between the two of them; but I am certain that Obermeier did not, for his own voice drowned out that of Richter. It was something considerably more than mimicry. It was uncanny. But even more so was that when Obermeier took the turn in the path, Richter also made a right turn. It took him off the walk, through a bed of tulips, and briskly into a heavy marble bench. His kneecap struck it with a sickening crack, and over it he went. He did not put out his arms as he fell, and he brought up with his head against the concrete edge of a lily pool. And there he lay, cold as a cake of ice, blood slowly trickling over the yellow cement. The crash of his fall made Obermeier turn his head; he took one look, trotted to the castle and disappeared inside. A few minutes later Rausch and Teubner came out on the run, gathered him up and carried him inside.

McCarthy ranged up beside me as I stood smiling, staring at the patch of Richter's blood. "What the devil do you make of that?"

"Richter overplayed it," I said noncommittally.

He looked at me shrewdly. McCarthy was very fast on the uptake. "You have an idea, haven't you, LaFarge? You know what happened just now?"

"Well," I said slowly, "it does remind me of something. I've seen French-Canadian loggers in Quebec act that way. Jumpers, they call them. I've heard of it happening to members of certain Siberian tribes. In Malaya they call it *latah*. But damn if I ever heard of an Aryan being like that. I don't know why he shouldn't, though, come to think of it. No one knows much about it."

"But what on earth is it?" asked McCarthy impatiently.

"Oh, it's a peculiar kind of hypnotism. For some reason, certain persons are subject to attacks of what you might call 'abject imitativeness.' Their minds slip into rapport with that of another individual, and they have to imitate him. Sometimes they don't realize what they're doing, more often they do and can't help it."

"That's the most extraord'ry thing I ever heard," said McCarthy. "What starts it?"

"Depends on the individual. Generally a jumper'll start imitating someone when his attention is suddenly and forcibly attracted to another person. Richter's was, you know. He was shocked and surprised when Obermeier bellowed at him. Did you notice that he was entranced all the while that Obemeier faced him, and as soon as Obermeier turned he began to move in perfect synchronization with him? Some jumpers get the condition so badly that they slip into a state of *latah* for no reason at all."

"How long does it last?"

"Seconds or weeks. I remember reading about a Malayan who followed his high priest around that way for two solid months. The priest decided that the man was possessed, and that he himself was haunted. But he couldn't get anyone to kill the fellow, because the tribal laws prohibited laying hands on a priest, and the tribe regarded the two of them as one and the same person. So the priest walked up a river bank, made a sharp turn and started across a cane bridge. The man in *latah* made the right turn at the same time, but there wasn't any bridge. He cured his *latah* all right. The poor beggar drowned."

McCarthy grunted and got out his pipe. "Drowned, did he?" he said around the stem. "Hm-m-m. I find that most interesting."

Thinking it over, I did, too.

What account Richter gave to the adjutant for his peculiar actions, I'll never know. He was on sick leave for three days, and in the guardhouse

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for four, and he was much sobered when he resumed his duties. The prisoners and the guard left each other tensely alone, but we knew that it was only a matter of time before he would start his peculiar brand of torture again. He did, and he started on me.

My legs were still shaky, and I was making my way over to my favorite bench one afternoon when I became conscious of a faint creaking. For a nasty moment I thought it was me, for with every step I took I heard a creak; a long one for my right leg, a short one for my left. I stopped; so did the noise. I took two more steps. *C-r-r-r—ik!* Puzzled, I looked around me, and saw Richter standing just inside the old summerhouse, airily looking at all the world but me. He had one hand on the doorknob, and it was that door that needed the oiling, not my leg. I ground my teeth and said nothing; and all the way over to the bench he kept up the crude stunt. I made myself so busy packing my pipe that I jumped when I realized McCarthy had seated himself beside me.

"I saw that," said Mac casually, nodding toward the summerhouse.

"Yep," I said. "Here we go again."

Mac shook his head. "Things are going to be a bit different," he said. "Let's us make that jumper jump."

"Have you been thinking about that, too?" I grinned.

"Right-o. Let's see what we can do with him before he gets too rambunctious." He swiftly outlined his plan. It was a honey.

I got up and limped over to the summerhouse. "Richter!"

He stood sullenly at attention, his little pig eyes roving up and down me, finally settling insultingly on my crooked leg.

"How do you feel?" I said conversationally.

He looked out at the castle, saw that the coast was clear, and leaned up against the doorpost. "*Gut,*" he grunted, and spat out the door just past my head.

The finest of the filthy spray settled on my cheek. I gasped with rage, got a four-handed grip on myself. "You know, you remind me of my cousin Julius in Winnipeg," I chatted.

He regarded me with a sort of disgusted wonder on his face as I gabbled on in disconnected sentences. He was completely at a loss. Just as he was about to burst into my prattle, I heard a faint tap on the wall of the summerhouse. I don't think I have ever moved faster in my life.

I reached out, took him by the shoulders and hauled him out of the door, spinning him around at the same time. McCarthy, who had been stealthily circling the building while I held the Nazi in conversation, leaped out of hiding with a rush, four feet in front of us. Richter froze, scared out of his wits.

For an interminable moment I was in doubt. Mac and the German held each other's eyes while I held Richter's shoulders, and all three of us were afraid to breathe. Then Mac knotted his jaw, turned around and walked off. Richter shuddered, moaned a very tiny moan, and—followed him.

"Got him!" I cried happily.

"Good stuff," said two voices, speaking as one. It was an astonishing effect. Mac stopped and turned around. "What are we going to do with the blighter?" they asked me.

"Can't do much with the two of you as close together as that," I said. "Steer him into the wall."

"Right-o," they said in unison. Mac gauged his distances, walked up to the corner of the summerhouse, left-faced and disappeared around the corner. Richter marched up to the wall, hit it with a bump, and kept on marching futilely. I moved over to where I could see both of them.

"How's this?" asked Richter. It was Mac speaking, but he was too far away for me to hear the low-voiced question. Talk about your wireless transmission!

"That's dandy," I said. They both stopped and turned; Mac came back to me while Richter plowed through flower beds. When the Englishman reached me, Richter was well out in the open space where Mac used to do his tumbling.

"Now what?" asked Mac.

"Now Herr Richter is going to put on a bit of a show," I said gleefully. "See if you can make the silly fool get his gun out."

He began fumbling about the region of his side pocket. He had to make eight or ten passes, but finally got it right.

"Up in the air," I said. "Just once."

The Mauser roared. Richter, carefully guided by Mac and me, holstered it and stared raptly into the sky. A thudding of boots, and Rausch skidded to a stop in front of him. In rather low German, he wanted to know what the hell. Fortunately, Mac's German was flawless.

"Didn't you see it?" said Richter. "A Hawker Hurricane!"

Rausch was big and dumb. He stared up into the sky, and then said he didn't see any airplane.

"Of course you don't," said Richter. "I shot him down." He beckoned Rausch closer and whispered, "It was Rudolph Hess flying back." Rausch went a little popeyed. "He had to get out," said Richter. "The British Isles have been torpedoed and sunk." They gazed solemnly at each other, and then Richter burst into rich Northumberland laughter. He slapped Rausch on the back, and Rausch, suddenly conscious that he was being kidded, uttered a complementary guffaw, took a deep breath, forced out another laugh, and then beat a hasty retreat.

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"Halt!" snapped Richter. "Come back here, my friend. I want to tell you a fine English joke I learned from one of these dirty prisoners. You don't speak any English, do you?"

Rausch shook his head.

"All the better," said Richter jovially. "Now listen to me. The next time you see Herr Obermeier, you say these words in English." He repeated a phrase a few times, and the gullible Rausch said it over and over until he had it right.

I have always regretted that I wasn't around when Rausch walked into Obermeier's quarters and said, "Thumbs up, you old prince!" (I think it was "prince" he was told to say.) "There'll always be an England!"

Richter stood out there humming an air called "The Tinker He Went Walking" that Mac hadn't learned in Sunday school until Obermeier erupted violently out into the garden. "Richter!"

"Ja! Heil Hitler!"

"Heil Hitler!" sputtered the adjutant. "Are you responsible for sending that blockhead in to me with those seditious utterances?"

Richter put a finger to his lips. "There's going to be a revolution," he said gravely.

"A revolution? Traitor! Marxist! Jew!"

"It is the truth, Herr Obermeier. Look." And Richter rose off the ground in a perfect back somersault. Obermeier stepped back in alarm. Richter spread his hands and smiled. "You see? There was a revolution. I revolved, no?"

Obermeier's face went into travail and delivered a laugh. Once he had laughed out loud he found that it was an easy and pleasant thing to do, and he roared until the tears ran down his cheeks. "Richter," he gasped after a time. "I have thought hardly of you. I have never credited you with a sense of humor." His features suddenly went wooden. "But this is war. This for such foolishness is no time."

Richter said easily, "Hate is all the stronger if you give it a rest. I respectfully suggest to the adjutant that the prisoners should be served beer this evening."

"A profound thought," said the adjutant, after thinking it over. "That will do, Richter." He eased his conscience by speaking very severely. "And hereafter curb your nonsense!" He went briskly into the castle. As he went through the door his voice drifted back—"Revolution. Hah! *Das ist gut!*"

"What are we going to do with the fool now?" asked Mac. I looked out at the fine young specimen of Aryan manhood and grunted. "Pity we can't send him to Berchtesgaden," I said. "I'd like to pull that 'There'll always be an England' gag on der Fuehrer."

"That would be jolly—fine." Mac swayed suddenly, mumbled something.

"What?" I asked.

"Jolly— *Ach! Ich neine—*" He shook his head drunkenly.

"Mac!" I rapped. "Mac! What's the matter?"

Sirens suddenly screamed outside the walls. As they died down I heard the growl of many motors. Torn between Mac and the noises outside, I dragged him to the door and looked up. There was a clutter of aircraft in the sky, attack bombers and pursuits. A formation of Messerschmitts climbed into the sky, and three lovely P-37s howled down to meet them.

Mac said, "Feel deuced queer, old boy. I—" Suddenly he whipped away from me, snarling. *"Schmutzig Englitsch schweinhund, du!"* he spat, and he clawed at his hip, pulled a nonexistent Mauser out of his nonexistent holster, filled me full of imaginary holes. Every time his forefinger twitched there was a report outside. Richter had his gun out, was banging away at the garden wall. The sound of his shots was lost in the unholy racket from above.

"Mac!" I screamed, shaking him, slapping him. "Mac! What's—"

He closed his eyes, opened them slowly. "This bloody thing works both ways," he gritted. "The damned—goose-stepper's—fighting—" He rallied and said briskly, "What's going on—air raid?"

"Yes. Mac, are you all right?"

"I can hold him off, I th— Ah-h-h! *Heil, mein Fuehrer! Der fleigand—*" He drifted off into a a hopeless jumble of words. Then, "LaFarge," he said, "remember I said I'd like a chance at that air field if I ever get out of here? Well, I probably won't, but maybe I can give someone else a break. I'll wager those lads up there don't know they have anything like that right under them. Are the Huns sending up any planes from here?"

I looked out. "No. Dammit, you're right! They've got it camouflaged. They don't want it bombed, and it's likely because they have a man-sized gasoline dump around here!"

"We've got to—get word—" He groaned, came back strongly. He seemed to be putting up a tremendous battle. "Richter's getting the knack of it," he said grimly. "For a minute there I thought I was out in the garden. I ran my tongue around my mouth and felt a lot of rotten teeth. Ugh!" He shuddered. "Got—shaving mirror?" I had one of those unbreakable trench mirrors in my tunic. Mac waved me outside. "Give it to the Hun," he said. "Right hand. Hurry, now, I don't know if—" And he went into one of those bilingual paroxysms. I ran out to Richter.

As I thrust the mirror into his hand he eyed me viciously, reached for his gun, paused, grinned. "Good stuff, chum," he said. "Thumbs—*für der Reich*—be an England!"

It occurred to me what Mac had wanted him to have the mirror for. Heliograph. But what was

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the use of that puny flash of sunlight? How could it attract the attention of a pilot in a dog-fight? Off chance. Why didn't he want me to get out there and signal? I glanced around, saw guards on the walls, Obermeier running around like a brood hen. Richter *might* not be noticed, standing there in the garden with the mirror in his palm. I hobbled back to the summerhouse and ducked inside.

"Give me your watch," said Mac. For the moment he was completely himself. I handed it to him, and he moved into the doorway where the late, bright afternoon sun streamed in. He let it play on the back of the watch, threw a spot on the ceiling, and began twitching his wrist steadily. Out in the garden Richter stood firm, eyes upward, right hand extended. Mac began to send.

Dot-dash-dot. Dot-dash. Dot-dot-dash-dot. R. A. F.

I don't know how long that went on. Mac and Richter were engaged in a monumental struggle, weaving now and then on their feet, features working, sweat—and all the while, almost without a break, Mac sent those three letters. Twice he screamed in pain, and both times it was in Richter's guttural tones. McCarthy. Renfrew McCarthy, of Northumberlandshire. Never was there such a man!

Once Richter threw the mirror from him, and I had to limp out and put it in his hand again. And Mac kept sending.

There was a growing, screaming roar. I looked up and saw a Messerschmitt 110 on the tail of a P-37. They seemed to be headed right for us, coming down, coming incredibly fast. At about two hundred feet, the Curtiss began to pull out of it. The Me began to try. The Curtiss made it. The Me didn't. God bless the Nazis for building ships that are sloppy on the turns! The Me whipped low over my head, crashed into the garden wall. The P-37 groaned upward, lost speed, stalled into a wingover, and began to circle at about eight hundred feet.

"Mac!" I screamed. "He's seen us! He's seen us!"

Mac, his face green-white and beaded, chuckled hoarsely and kept sending. Fascinated, I watched that bouncing spot of light on the ceiling. Now it said. *"Cam.—air field—300 yds—SSE."* He repeated it, repeated it again. Now he was sending, *"Castle—munition dump."* And then the two of them were mixed: *"Camstle—300 munition—SSE."*

"Mac—are there munitions in the castle?"

"No, dammit, Richter's sending that! I think I'm driving him under, LaFarge! But—he's going to see to it that if bombs are dropped, we get them, too!"

The circling P-37 waggled its wings and started to climb. I could almost feel the crisp bur of its radio, calling for bombs. A flight of Blenheims swelled up out of the west, wheeled toward us.

"Right-o, Mac," I said quietly. "We better get as near underground as we can." I put an arm around him. He leaned so heavily against me that my legs hurt me. He was dead beat. "Chin up," I gritted, and began dragging him across the garden.

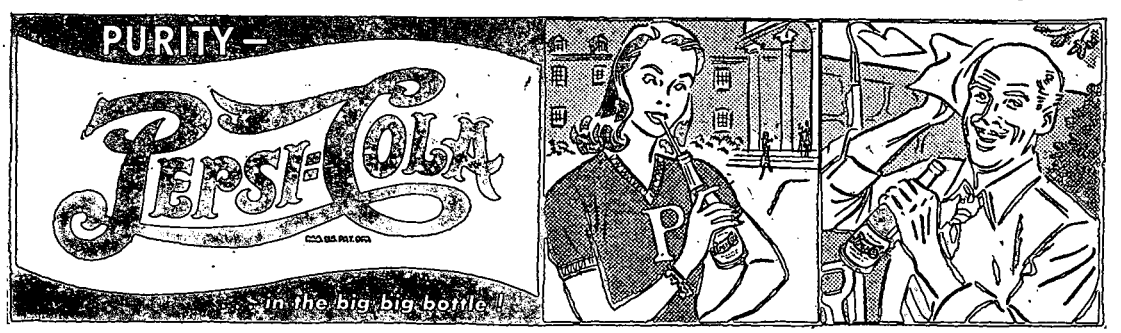
Outside the walls there was a flash of flame, and the ground shook. It shook again, and again. Ahead of us, Richter floundered crazily. When we reached the castle door I propped Mac against the jamb and looked back while I got my wind.

The whole skyline was aflame. There was gasoline there, but plenty. A huge Kurier waddled into the air, and a Hurricane cut it down, and I wondered why in hell they tried to get that monster into the air at a time like this. A bomb landed just outside the wall and blew it inward, and the debris swept Richter off his feet. I mean that word for word. I looked at his body and saw that he was all broken up about it. When the rubble hit Richter, Mac shrieked and passed out.

I'd no sooner got him inside when the next load of eggs were laid on the roof right over our heads. Richter's message had been right. There was an ammunition dump in the castle. The whole bloody business came crashing and crushing down on us. So they got us and most of the other imperials. But we got an air field and an ammunition dump. And Richter. We got game, set and match.

THE END.

NO FINER DRINK... at sixteen—or sixty



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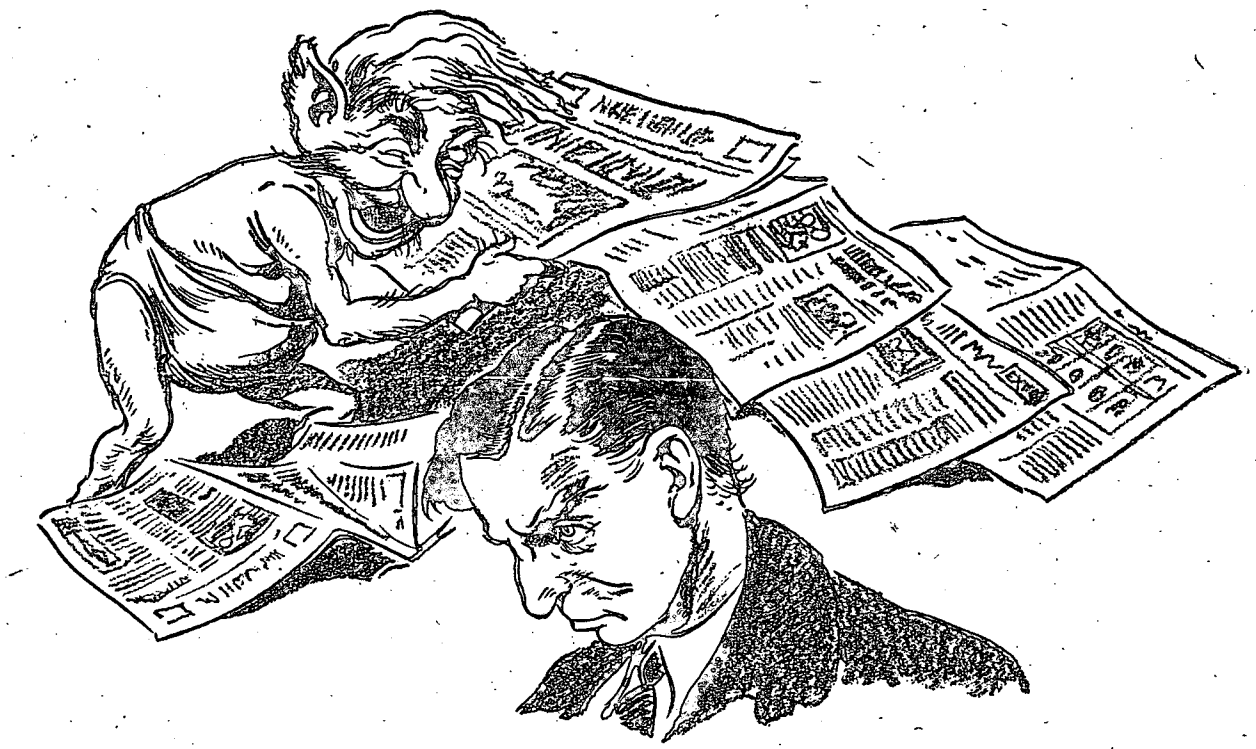

EVERYTHING'S JAKE

By John Hawkins

Homer was a writer, of the unsuccessful type. But Homer had a pixie, one Jake, with a supply of tomorrow's newspapers on hand—

Illustrated by Kolliker

Homer Black was sitting in his office, staring at the tips of his shoes. He was a little guy, on the owlish side, and he was hunting an idea. He was a writer. Romance was his dish. Homer's heroes looked like Tarzan, with clothes on. They strode through a world full of beautiful wenches. About three times to a page one of these sweater gals would fling herself at the hero, murmuring, "You're wonderful!" It was nice work, but lately the editors hadn't seen eye to eye with Homer. They'd said so in letters both brief and nasty. Which was bad because the rent was due.

So he sat with his feet on the desk hunting for something new. No luck. His head was as empty as yesterday's beer bottles. It was a gray and empty desert, stretching away to a dreary horizon. No ideas. Not even the old boy-meets-girl. And then something happened.

There was a stir of movement far back in the dark waste of his mind. A glitter of white. Then a newspaper came sailing up out of nowhere. It was like a trick camera shot from a movie, one of those things where calendar leaves fly at you from space. Homer sat very still. For three days he'd been trying to dream up something usable. He wasn't going to frighten this away. Not yet.

He wasn't particularly surprised to have a newspaper soaring around inside his head. He'd about decided some sort of pixie lived in the idea department of his mind. *Something* had thrown him some weird ones in the past. So he waited, quiet and grateful. There was always a chance that this, whatever it was, would pay the rent.

The newspaper got bigger and bigger. It flipped up on end, as though on a screen. Homer read the screaming headline:

Sex Fiend Slays Three!

And then he scowled.

"The hell with it!" he said aloud.

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Instantly, the newspaper was gone. An odd chill scampered up Homer's spine. He felt as if he'd insulted the idea-department pixie. But that was silly. There was no pixie. A man couldn't insult himself. So then—

"To hell with it!" he said again.

That sex-field stuff was no good to him. Romance was the thing to feed the troops, and he had letters in his file to prove it. Sex field! How was a man to spin something light and tender out of that? All right for one of the horror boys, but it wasn't in Homer's kitchen.

He pulled the daybook across the desk. He wrote: "Tuesday. No idea; no work." Then he put on his hat.

He had to pass the rental agent's office to reach the elevator. He humped his shoulders and scooted, rabbitlike, past the open door. The agent saw a brown flicker if he saw anything at all. Practice had given Homer a certain speed.

Homer thumbed the down button. Clatter seeped into the hall from behind an unmarked door nearby. The staccato machine-gunning of a typewriter going at a hundred-word-a-minute clip. Homer winced. That was Diane Porter turning out another serial, or a movie script, or something that would pay off in important money. She was a writer and a success. And she was built along the general lines of the gals who flung themselves at Homer's heroes. This was easy to understand, since all Homer's heroines were modeled after Diane Porter.

Once or twice a week she popped into his office, tousled and golden and breathtaking. She used Homer as a sounding board. She talked *at* him. She was one of the writers who have everything planned down to the last comma before they start work. Homer was strictly of the cook-it-up-as-you-go-along school. About all he could do was look at her in dumb wonder and say, "Yes!" admiringly in the right places.

Between visits, Homer had a little dream he dusted off. He played the hero in this one—glasses, dank hair, narrow chest, and all—and it consisted mainly of love scenes done to soft music. With the golden Diane saying, "Homer, you're magnificent! You really are!"

But it was pure fiction. Homer could face the truth, though it hurt. Diane's ambition was to take as much money as possible out of circulation. She had bank accounts, bonds and real estate. The elevator operator said she was a fast girl with a buck—if it was some other guy's buck. And that wasn't bad description. Once, when Homer had sold three stories in a row, he'd asked Diane why she'd never married. Her answer had been brief and pointed: "I never met a millionaire."

Her typewriter had stopped now. Homer was teetering on one foot, trying to dredge up courage enough to go rap on her door, when the elevator creaked up the shaft.

"Knockin' off for the day?" the boy asked.

"Yeah," said Homer. "Nothin' gives, so I quit."

"That dame"—the boy jerked his thumb at Diane's door—"with her it's somethin' gives, or else! She makes dough faster'n the mint. She really turns it out."

"She's good," Homer admitted.

"Whyn't you ask her how she does it?"

"Maybe I will," said Homer.

And he started the long walk home dreaming about that. Then he decided that as long as it was a dream he might as well make it good. There were other things he wanted to ask Diane. More personal, more romantic, and much more interesting—

Came morning, and the problem of getting past the three-chinned ogre who called herself Mrs. Mahoney. She ran Mahoney's Boardinghouse, Clean Rooms and Fine Foods. She was, Homer felt, a combination of Shylock and bloodhound, with a spot of Borgia added for seasoning. She trapped him neat, just short of the hatrack.

"I want my money," she said. "Pay up!"

"The mailman—" Homer began.

Mrs. Mahoney's chins quivered in wrath. She'd heard that old one about the checks that would surely come today. She'd heard them all; she said so in a foghorn voice.

Homer said, "I'll get the money somewhere."

"You will—or you'll sleep in the park!"

Homer walked downtown. It was a full mile, but the bus fare was a dime. He felt lonely and kicked around. A hell of a life he had! Mahoney on one end of the day, the rental agent on the other. And that idea-department pixie tossing up newspapers instead of something a guy could use. Fine thing! It was enough to make a man go join the army. But Homer had tried that. His ears still got red when he remembered the way the examining doctor'd grinned. "Son," the doctor'd said, "that chest of yours is just the right size—for a mouse!"

"A wise guy," Homer muttered. "Bah!"

He went past the corner newsboy and, automatically, he took a quick slant at the headlines.

Sex Fiend Slays Three!

Homer marched on. Same old stuff, day after day. Those newspaper guys had no imagination. They— And then it hit him. That, word for word, was the headline he'd read yesterday afternoon.

Mice feet of cold ran up Homer's spine. This was a morning *Tribune;* yesterday afternoon it had still been raw stock and unset type. It— He retraced his steps, thinking: "Steady, boy. It's some kind of a mistake—" But it wasn't! The

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headline *was* the same. The make-up of the paper was the same, subheads, pictures, everything. Homer swallowed.

"Look," he said. "Is that today's paper?"

"Try sayin' it ain't!" the newsboy told him.

"When . . . when'd it go to press?"

"Midnight," said the newsboy. "So what?"

Weakly, Homer said, "I'll take one."

Safely in his office, Homer spread the paper on his desk. The headline roared at him. And for an instant he thought he saw something peering up from behind the words—a Puckish face that wasn't quite a face. A great, grinning slit of mouth, a crooked nose, and round, merry eyes that shone like mirrors of jet. It shimmered there and was gone. And yet he could sense it still—in the room—in himself—elusive, intangible, and as real as a kick in the pants.

Homer shivered. He rubbed his fingertips across the headline and found them stained with a smudge of ink. Still wet. Slowly, unwillingly, his eyes went to the subheads, to the body of the story. The killer, he read, had run amok at eight p. m. the evening before. The hair crawled on Homer's neck. He'd seen the soaring headline around three o'clock —*five hours before the murders occurred!*

"O-oh!" he whispered. "Holy Moses!"

He put his hands on the desk edge and held on. Tightly. A fine mess this was! He'd read of the killings before they'd happened. And he'd gone home and gone to bed and let murder run its course. Not so good! For one awful minute Homer wondered if he'd swung the ax himself. That thought shocked him clear to his heels. He read the rest of the story frantically.

And he drew a great, shuddering breath of relief. The police had the killer behind bars. A dozen witnesses had identified the man.

"*Whew!*" said Homer. "That was close!"

For a time Homer stared into space. He held his head stiffly erect and tried to think of nothing at all. That turned out to be quite a trick. His mind was oddly active. Focusing its attention upon nothing was much like trying to hold a wild thing that squirmed and kicked and bit, and tried to bolt off on a tangent of its own. He tried, but in spite of himself he wondered how and why. He wondered if he could do it again.

And he was scared. Somehow, the whole idea belonged to things shadowy and untouchable. It was a monstrously whacky jack-in-the-box and it was safely locked away. So why go hunting trouble? Why prod the unknown? Call it a dream, or an accident. Let it be and to hell with it. But curiosity rode him like the old man of the sea. At last he turned his eyes inward, timidly searching the gray space there. And nothing happened.

"It was something I ate," he said.

He regretted that, instantly. Accident, dream, imp, pixie or simply a gigantic X, it was not to be taken lightly. Homer's irreverence apparently prodded it awake. A storm of white came shooting up over the rim of his mind. Papers, magazines and handbills rocketed at him out of nowhere. Like a blizzard in a beer bottle, he thought. And inside my head—

After the first fear passed it was interesting. Now and then he found a readable bit in the whirling confusion.

Reds Stem Nazi Horde
Plane Production Hits New High
R. A. F. Hammers French Coast

One paper bore a huge picture of Hitler and a headline printed in German. Homer began to wish he'd not neglected foreign languages at college. Here was a chance to get both sides of the war news, in advance. Posters stamped with the hammer and sickle and the red star of the Soviet screamed at him in type he could not read. Squiggly Chinese characters ran up and down another page—

"Some newsstand," said Homer admiringly.

"Sure," came the answer. "An' for free."

Homer swallowed. He looked around the room. It was empty. He took another grip on the desk. "Who's talkin'?" he demanded. "From where?"

"Me," said the voice. "From up here."

Homer whimpered, "Wo-oh, I'm goin' nuts!"

"Could be," said the voice tartly, "but ain't!"

The voice, waspish and yet salted with humor, came from inside his head. And he could see this —this thing the way he'd seen the newspapers. It squatted up there, fat-bellied and smug. It wore a scrap of colored breechclout and a mocking grin, and it scratched itself.

"That's impolite," said Homer quickly.

The thing made a derisive noise.

"Please go 'way," Homer whispered. "Now!"

"Don't be silly. I like it up here."

Homer gulped. "Why pick on me?"

"Reasons," said the thing. "Many and various."

"Who . . . what are you?"

Blandly, it replied, "I'm Jake."

"That's no name for a . . . a thing like you."

"I like it," Jake retorted. "I borrowed it from a bartender. He was a hell of a nice guy. We played the horses." Jake scratched his tummy again. "It's sad."

"What's sad?" asked Homer, unwillingly.

"What happened to Jake," said Jake.

Homer gulped. "Go on."

"Can't," said Jake. "It's a trade secret."

Homer mopped his steaming brow. "Go 'way," he begged. "Go find another bartender. Go haunt a house!"

"I like it here," said Jake complacently.

"But I don't like you!" Homer cried.

"Here comes company," said Jake.

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"Don't be changing the subject," said Homer.

"It's the chisel," Jake explained. "The female Scrooge." And he vanished then, like a night-club balloon that's come in contact with a lighted cigarette.

"Jake," said Homer. "Hey, wait!"

Diane Porter walked in then.

"You didn't answer my knock," she said. "But I could hear you muttering in here. What's wrong, Homer? Have you jumped your trolley?"

"I . . . I was reading," said Homer, flustered.

She looked at the bare desk top. "Reading?"

"Tomorrow's papers. Next week's."

A frown penciled tiny lines between Diane's eyes. "That's a neat trick. But really!" Her voice squeaked up the scale; she edged back toward the door. "I'd just as soon not know how it's done. I'll be running—"

"Wait, Diane. I'll prove it."

"Do you feel funny? Do you think you're Hitler or somebody? Have you been seeing things?"

Homer turned red. "I'm not crazy."

"I can get you odds on that," she said.

"It started yesterday," he told her. "I saw a newspaper in . . . well, inside my head. So I read the headline like anybody would. Today I—"

"And you think you're not nuts!"

"Wait till you hear it all," he begged.

"Have at it," she said, poised for instant flight.

The explanation wasn't easy. Mental processes are hard to define; and this, Homer knew, wasn't strictly a mental process. It was way out there on the edge. And he didn't dare mention Jake. Not unless he wanted her to yell for the man with the butterfly net.

"You imagine a thing," he said lamely. "You see it as though it was on a movie screen inside your head. So that's the way this is. Only not quite."

Soberly, Diane said, "Demonstrate."

"Why . . . uh . . . I'll try."

"Make it tomorrow's *Tribune*."

"Tomorrow's *Tribune*," he echoed.

The words were a cue—a suggestion timidly offered to Jake. Homer heard deep laughter rumbling through his head; he flinched, darting a quick look at Diane. Apparently she did not hear the sound. Then came the familiar glitter of white. A paper whisked out of the dark of his mind, edge to the wind. Black headlines leaped at Homer.

"Fire rages in dock section," he read aloud. "Two firemen killed fighting blaze. Damage estimate runs to million. F. B. I. investigation promised."

Diane Porter said, "Keep talking."

She's snatched a notebook from Homer's desk, and now her flying pencil filled the page with crisp pothooks and curlicues. "It doesn't cost a cent to be sure, m'lad. Never let it be said that Diane Porter passed up a chance to get in on the ground floor. We'll make a record and we'll see. Read on—"

A man could have too much fresh air, Homer decided. The brisk night wind slammed through the park and left him blue and shivering. And a park bench had not been built for comfortable sleeping. The slats ran the wrong way. "Inventions of the devil," Homer muttered. "Two hours on one of these an' a man looks like he'd been whaled with a picket fence—"

"It's your own fault," said Jake.

"I got locked out of my room, didn't I?"

"Take it easy," said Jake. "I'm trying to help. Find yourself a buck an' we'll run it up to real dough. Then we can move into some joint with a little swank."

"I want no part of you," said Homer.

"Then sit here an' freeze—"

The night was long. The park cops had a nasty way of slugging a man's shoe soles with a clubbed nightstick. Homer found out about that. He would, he was sure, limp with both feet for the rest of his life. And there was Jake, always present, always jeering. Homer tried to dismiss him as pure nightmare. It didn't work. Jake made nightmare seem a forbidden pleasure.

There was no escape. Jake was inside his head. Then, if Homer tried to stare across the dawn, he'd appear to float in the smoke of Homer's cigarette. Homer was sick and tired of him, of the trick with the newspapers, of the waspish voice that buzzed in his ears. O. K., the next step was to get Jake out of there. But how do you dispossess a ribald imp? Homer's reading had been vague on the subject. He seemed to remember something about holy water, candles and seven virgins. And a fat lot of help that was!

But there *had* to be a way. Homer tried to think it through, with no luck at all. A new blizzard started in his head just then. He forgot about imps, cops and iron-slatted park benches. Several hundred French post cards were sailing around back of his eyes, most of which Homer had never seen. Homer gave up the thought of sleep and became engrossed in his private double-bill. He didn't hear the screaming of many sirens off in the night.

It was not yet seven when Homer reached the office building the next morning. A sparse growth of beard smudges on his cheeks, he looked tired and unhappy. Chilled through, he clumped into the building lobby. His desk was big and flat-topped. With luck, he could curl up there and sleep for a couple of hours before the rental agent threw him out in the street.

"Some fire last night," the elevator boy said.

"Fire?" snarled Homer. "What fire?"

The boy blinked. "Where you been?"

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"At a burlesque show," said Homer flatly.

Diane was waiting in the hall. "Homer!" she said, and there was respect in her voice. "You're wonderful!"

"That ain't the way I feel," he said.

"But you had it right! Every word!"

"Can you come back later," he began. "I—"

"Why, *Homer!* Don't you like me?"

"Like you?" It dawned on Homer that here was his dream come true. A minute ago she'd said he was wonderful; now she was looking at him the way the gals in the movies looked at Gable. Homer grabbed at opportunity and Diane.

"Like you!" he said. "Here's a sample."

"A caveman," she murmured. "I'm surprised."

And so was Homer. He'd moved without thinking. That fierce and sudden kiss had started silver bells ringing all over the place; his knees had turned to water. It was pure wonderful. Dreams *did* come true! Homer's golden contentment was rudely shattered by the reappearance of Jake, on the screen of his mind. A scowling Jake whose face was black with anger.

"Get that chiseler outta here!" he snarled.

Homer jumped, fully expecting Diane to resent the waspish voice. Then he remembered she couldn't hear Jake. She took a step toward Homer and Homer took a step back. Homer studied her face and found himself thinking of busy little wheels clicking around—she looked about as emotional as an adding machine. Suddenly, her lips trembled. Tears shone in her eyes.

"The gouge!" Jake warned. "Here it comes!"

Huskily, Diane said, "It isn't fair, Homer. You shouldn't snub your old friends, just because you're going to be rich and famous."

"She's really corny," said Jake acidly.

Homer ignored the bitter imp. He thought of the breakfast he'd skipped, of the park bench, or the rental agent. "You've got me mixed up with two other guys," he said. "I'll part with my chance at success for a dime."

"Sold!" snapped Diane.

"But I'll never be a good writer. I—"

"Phooey for writing!" Diane's eyes were shining now. "It's this thing you do with the newspapers that will make you famous. You can corner all the money in the world, Homer."

"And she'll corner you," said Jake.

Homer said, "I'm sorry, Diane."

"Have you forgotten how to do it?"

"No," said Homer. "It's not that—" He lagged to a halt then, aware of Diane's slow sigh of relief. He couldn't explain—couldn't tell her it was Jake who tossed the newspapers at him. He'd decided not to speak to Jake, for, somehow, he knew it was a short step from conversation to complete surrender. Once he began asking favors of Jake he'd never be rid of him—

"Newspapers give me a headache," he told Diane.

"I'll buy you aspirin by the bucket," said Diane. "I'll be your pardner." She paused, eyes calculating and thoughtful. "Can you read the stock-market report, or the race results?"

"Hang on!" said Jake. "Here we go!"

Homer said, "I've never tried, Diane."

"You will try, won't you? For me?"

"No!" snapped Homer. "I won't!"

He intended this harsh declaration for Jake, but Jake was not impressed. He yawned. Homer set his teeth. He'd show that—that grinning monkey who was boss!

Diane cocked her head. "I'll bet you can't."

"Can't what?" said Homer.

"Read today's race results."

"I could if I wanted to."

"I've changed my mind about you, Homer. You read one paper, but that was an accident. Or maybe you set the fire yourself. You're just a fake." Her eyes narrowed. "And I'm sorry I let you kiss me. Good-by—"

Homer watched her turn toward the door, clinging firmly to his resolve. Then the old dream of soft music and the golden Diane sprang up to haunt him. He was booting the chance of a lifetime. She'd practically thrown herself at him. What if she did like money; it was useful stuff to have around. It bought things—breakfasts, big shiny cars, and the right to thumb your nose at the rental agent. So all right! What did he care for a little old imp? He wasn't afraid. Not much—

From the door, Diane said, "Bye, Homer."

"Wait," said Homer weakly. "Don't go."

"Sucker!" Jake hissed. "Chump!"

"Will you do it for me?" Diane persisted.

"I . . . uh . . . I'll try," said Homer.

Now Homer really had a headache. Great oaths roared through his mind. Jake bounced around up there with a fine disregard for Homer's comfort. It was some time before he finally produced a *Racing Final*. "You're worse than that bartender," he grumbled. "Don't know when you're well off!"

"Long shot gallops home," Homer read.

"Which horse?" Diane asked. "Which race?"

"Roman Candle. In the fifth at Santa Anita."

Breathlessly, she said, "Go on—"

Homer obeyed, reading slowly so she would miss no word. When he'd finished, she hurried away to her office and a telephone. Homer closed his eyes.

"What happened to the bartender?" he asked.

Jake leered. "Don't you wish you knew?"

"Will you go away an' let me alone?"

"No," said Jake, "—in spades!"

There was a lump in Homer's throat too big to swallow. He wanted to know what lay ahead for him, but his lips refused to form the question. He'd read yarns about prescience. As well as he could remember, the heroes of the stories had had

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the world by the tail for a time. Then they'd read of their own death and had gone to meet it in a daze. Or they'd read of coming madness and the shock of foreknowledge had blown their mental fuses. Maybe that's what'd happened to the bartender. Maybe that was why Jake wouldn't talk about the guy—

"Want to know what's coming?" Jake asked.

"Not if I can help it!" Homer said firmly.

"You can't," said Jake. "It's the landlord."

Firm steps came down the hall. The rental agent appeared, sharp-faced and thin, and smiling only with his lips. He dry-washed bony hands.

"Ah," he said. "About the rent—"

"I haven't got it," Homer told him.

There was a pause and the man's smile vanished. His face turned cold; his lips drew tight. "I'll have to ask you to leave," he said. "I'll hold your furniture as security until you—"

"What's all this?" said Diane, sharply.

The rental agent wet his lips. "Just business, Miss Porter. I have to protect the owner's interests. Unfortunately, Mr. Black can't pay his rent."

"I'll pay it for him," said Diane.

The man's smile came on as though controlled by a switch. "Splendid, Miss Porter. When shall I—"

"I'll give you a check this afternoon."

The rental agent went away and a warm glow took possession of Homer. Diane was going to pay his office rent. She wasn't mercenary or cold-blooded. He'd been wrong about her.

"You're swell!" he said, and the words were meant for Jake.

The ribald imp merely yawned. "She didn't come up with the dough in her hand," he pointed out sourly. "She's waiting till after the races before she lends you a dime. An' if Roman Candle don't win"—he chuckled—"then she'll help tall, thin and bloodless heave you out in the street!"

"You've got no faith," Homer accused.

"I've got sense," Jake countered blandly.

"Homer, I've been thinking." Diane opened her purse and took from it several sheets of paper covered with tightly written text. "You're a genius, but you're not practical. You need someone to look after you."

"Here comes the ax!" Jake warned.

Homer said, "What do you mean, Diane?"

"I want to help you, Homer. Because I like you."

Breathlessly, Homer said, "Do you really?"

"Is this for sixty-four bucks?" growled Jake.

Diane tapped the folded sheets of paper. "This's a simple agreement," she said, and her voice was a soft caress. "It—well, it makes me your manager, Homer. I will take care of the messy financial angles. You can go on just being a genius."

"And a sucker!" said Jake tartly.

Homer ignored him. "Yes, Diane?"

"Two of the elevator boys are coming down to act as witnesses," she said. "Just to make it all legal."

"You're a kind girl," said Homer.

"Yeah," said Jake, "—the smart kind!"

The elevator boys came in then, sheepish and

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self-conscious. Diane pressed a pen into Homer's hand. Jake screamed warnings, threats and curses. But he was only a fat little imp with a gift for superb profanity. Diane was very close. Her perfume made hot prickles run up and down Homer's spine. She was a sweater girl.

"On the dotted line," she whispered.

Homer signed his name.

"You're gonna be sorry!" cried Jake.

The rest of the morning was a hectic blur. Diane bubbled with plans. "We'll take the stock market for a cleaning," she said. "We'll break every bookie in the country. And if you can do the trick with magazines—if you can read, say, the issues of six months ahead, we'll really make a killing. We'll have a couple of girls take the stories down in shorthand as fast as you can read them. We— Oh, Homer, there's no end to this. No limit!"

"That," said Jake hastily, "is what you think."

Homer shuddered.

"What's the matter?" Diane asked.

"I think I've got the pip," he said.

"Drip is the name for her," snarled Jake.

"You'll feel better after the races," she said.

Roman Candle won going away. They got word of it by way of the radio in Diane's office. And a thousand dollars became twenty thousand, as simply as that. The other races fit precisely into Homer's forecast. It even became boring, after a time. Homer began to wish Diane would tune in some soft, romantic music. But Diane was all business now She worked with a huge ledger and an adding machine. When the last race had been run, she totaled a long column of figures and sighed happily.

"Nice!" she said. "I hit the jackpot!"

"What about me?" asked Homer.

"You? You're on a salary and a percentage."

"You would stick your neck out," said Jake.

"I thought—" Homer began.

Acidly, Jake said, "With what?"

"I supply the operating capital," said Diane. "I take all the risk, so it's only fair that I divide the profits as I see fit." She paused. "Besides, that's the way our contract reads."

"Contract?" said Homer blandly.

"She didn't want your autograph," Jake jeered.

"I've another idea," she said. "One that will be very profitable. You're going to give a demonstration of your skill for the newspapers. We'll pile up tremendous publicity. And then—" She leaned forward tensely. "We'll sell tomorrow's headlines to those who can pay. Think of it! Manufacturers and bankers and, yes—even Dictators will give us millions! Everyone wants to know what the future holds—"

"I don't!" Homer croaked.

He watched Diane with growing wonder. Her eyes were ice-blue now, and when her glance touched him he felt as if he'd been tossed in a quick-freeze plant. The soft and lovely sweater girl was gone. She was sleek and hard and ruthless now—

"What'd I tell you?" said Jake.

"Look, Diane." Homer wiped his sweating face. "I don't want to put on a show for the reporters. I'm happy the way I am. Let the other guys run the world. I—"

"You'll do what you're told!" she snapped.

"Tell her to go jump," said Jake. "I dare yuh."

"Diane, maybe we—" Homer began.

"No guts," said Jake. "A sissy britches."

"And don't think you can break the contract," said Diane, and her words had the impact of bullets. "I've got you sewed up tight—for the next ninety-nine years!"

Jake grinned broadly. "Hi, slave!"

Homer sank back in his chair. He saw her scoop up the phone and dial quickly. "City desk," she said, and then Homer stopped listening. His mind zigzagged back to the bartender. He had an uneasy hunch, a brittle premonition, that soon now, very soon, he'd know what had happened to that man. On the screen of his mind, Jake grew enormously. He was bland and smiling. He beamed at Homer, and he scratched himself.

"Look what you got me into," Homer said.

Jake chuckled deeply.

Diane said, "Come, Homer. All the papers are sending reporters over to City Hall. We'll demonstrate for them there."

Homer got to his feet. He was moving toward the door in the wake of the brisk Diane, when Jake said, "Hey! Take a look at this—" He pulled a newspaper out of space and held page 1 up for Homer to see.

Seer Proves Flop

Says Pixie Deserted Him. Authoress Throws Tantrum. Tears Contract to Bits

Homer said, "Thanks, pal."

"What'd you say?" asked Diane.

"You wouldn't understand," Homer told her.

Jake was holding another paper now, holding it in such a way that the date line was not visible. But Homer could see a picture—his picture! And beside him there was something young, lovely, blond and sweaterish. He could read part of the caption: "—actress weds wealthy writer!"

"Here's the elevator," said Diane.

And the boy said, "How's things, Homer?"

"Jake," said Homer happily. "Everything's Jake."

THE END.

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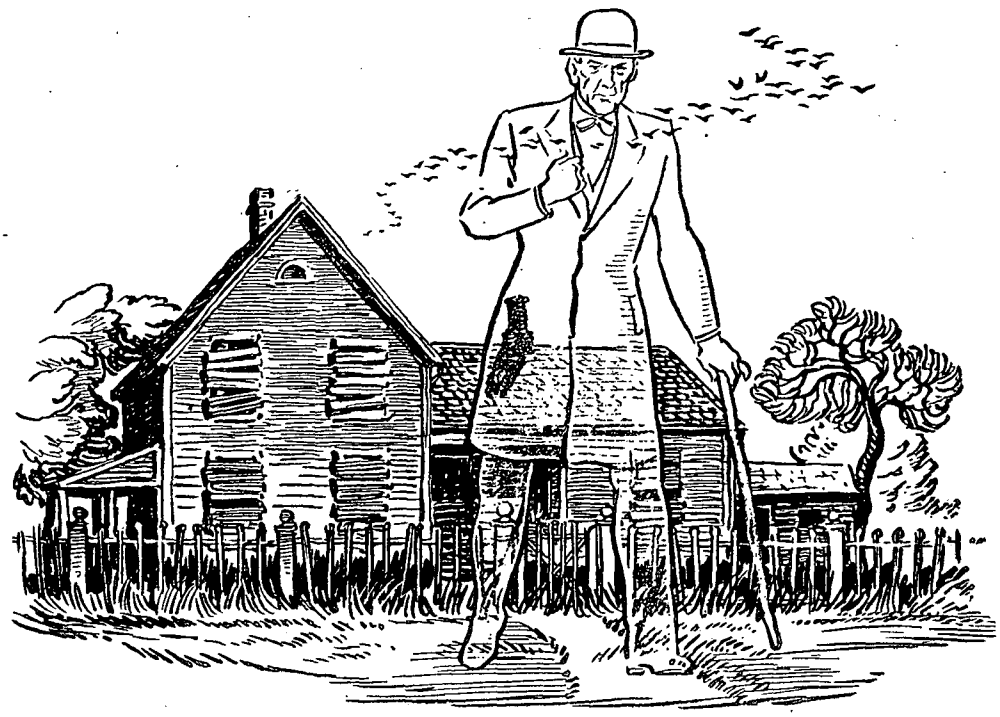

THE GHOST

By A. E. van Vogt

● One of the most unusual tales of haunting and ghosts we've seen—and one that might explain what ghosts really are—

Illustrated by Orban

"Four miles," Kent thought, "four miles from the main-line town of Kempster to the railwayless village of Agan." At least, he remembered that much.

He remembered the hill, too, and the farm at the foot of it. Only it hadn't been deserted when he saw it last.

He stared at the place as the hotel car edged down the long hill. The buildings showed with a curious, stark bleakness. All the visible windows of the farmhouse itself were boarded up. And great planks had been nailed across the barn door.

The yard was a wilderness of weeds and—Kent experienced an odd sense of shock—the tall, dignified old man who emerged abruptly from behind the house, seemed as out of place in that desolate yard as . . . as life itself.

Kent was aware of the driver leaning toward him, heard him say above the roar of the ancient engine:

"I was wondering if we'd see the ghost, as we passed; and yep, there he is, taking his morning walk."

"The ghost!" Kent echoed.

It was as if he had spoken a key word. The sun burst brilliantly from behind an array of dark clouds and flooded the valley with warm light. The blaze of it illuminated the drab old buildings—and wrought changes. The over-all grayness of the house showed in that bright illumination as a faded green.

The old man walked slowly toward the gate that led to the main highway. Nearer now, he seemed taller, thinner, a gaunt caricature of a human being; his black frock coat glinted in the sun.

Kent found his voice. "Ghost!" he said again. "Why, that's old Mr. Wainwright. He doesn't look a day older than when I left this part of the world fifteen years ago."

The old, square-fronted car ground queasily to a stop before the farm gate. The driver turned. It struck Kent that the man was smugly enjoying the moment.

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"See that gate?" the fellow asked. "Not the big one; the little one. It's padlocked, eh?"

Kent nodded. "What about it?"

"Watch!"

The old man stood fumbling at the gate less than ten feet away. It was like gazing at a pantomime, Kent thought; for the man paid no attention to the padlock, but seemed absorbed with some simpler catch.

Abruptly, the patriarch straightened, and pushed at the gate. Kent had no real sense of alienness. Without having given the matter any thought, he believed it was the gate that was going to open, and that it was some unusual aspect of the opening that he had been admonished to watch.

The gate didn't. It did not so much as stir; not a creak came from its rusty hinges. It remained solid, held in position by the uncompromising padlock.

The old man walked through it.

Through it! Then he turned, seemed to push at some invisible counterpart of the gate and, once again, stood there, as if manipulating a hidden catch.

Finally, apparently satisfied, he faced the car again; and, for the first time, saw it and its occupants. His long, finely wrinkled face lighted.

"Hello, there!" he said.

Kent hadn't expected speech. The words caught him like a blow. He felt a chill; his mind whirled with a queer, twisting motion that momentarily wrecked the coherence of his thought. He half leaned, half fell back against the seat because his muscles wouldn't support him.

"Ghost," he thought finally, dizzily. Good heavens, what was going on here?

The world began to right itself. The land and the horizon straightened; and there was the house and the barn, an almost colorless, utterly lifeless background to the beanpole of an old, old man and the magic gate through which he had stepped.

"Hello!" Kent said shakily. "Hello!"

The old man came nearer, peered; and an expression of surprise flitted across his face. "Why, it's Mr. Kent. I thought you'd left the Agan Hotel."

"Eh!" Kent began.

Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the driver make a sharp movement with one hand. The man whispered hastily:

"Don't act surprised at anything the ghost says. It confuses him."

Ghost! There it was again. Kent swallowed hard. "Am I mad?" he thought. "The last time I saw this old fellow was when I was twenty. He didn't know my name then. How—"

The old man was speaking again, in bewilderment: "I distinctly remember Mr. Jenkins, the proprietor, informing me that you had found it necessary to leave at once. He said something about a prophecy coming out exactly to the day, August 17th. People are always talking to me about prophecies. But that was the date he said it was, August 17th."

He looked up, unscrewing the frown from his thin, worn face. "I beg your pardon, young sir. It is very remiss of me to stand here mumbling to myself. May I say that I am glad that the report was untrue, as I have very much enjoyed our several conversations."

He raised his hat. "I would invite you in for tea, but Mrs. Carmody is not in the best of moods this morning. Poor woman! Looking after an old man must be a great trial; and I dare not add to her afflictions. Good morning to you, Mr. Kent. Good morning, Tom."

Kent nodded, unable to speak. He heard the driver say:

"S'long, Mr. Wainwright."

Kent watched, as the tall, frail figure walked slowly across the road behind the car, and moved unhurriedly across the open pasture land to the south. His mind and gaze came back to the car, as the driver, Tom, said:

"Well, Mr. Kent, you're lucky. You know how long you're staying at the Agan Hotel."

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Jenkins will have your bill ready for you August 17th."

Kent stared at him, uncertain whether he ought to laugh, or—what! "You're not trying to tell me that the ghost also tells the future. Why, today's only July 8th, and I intend to stay till the end of Septem—"

He stopped. The eyes that were staring into his were utterly earnest, humorless: "Mr. Kent, there never was anyone like Mr. Wainwright in the world before. When he tells the future, it happens; it was that way when he was alive, and it's the same now that he's dead.

"The only thing is that he's old. He's over ninety, and weak in the head. He gets confused; he always mixes the future with the past. To him it is the past, and it's all equally blurred. But when he says anything as clear as a date, it's so. You wait and see."

There were too many words; and the concreteness of them, the colloquial twang of them on the still air, built an oddly insubstantial picture. Kent began to feel less startled. He knew these country folk; and the conviction was suddenly strong in him that, in some obscure way, he was being made the victim of a practical joke.

It wouldn't do, of course, to say so. Besides, there was the unaccountable episode of the gate.

"This Mrs. Carmody," he said finally. "I don't recall her. Who is she?"

"She came to look after the farm when her sister-in-law, the old man's granddaughter, died.

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No blood relation, but—" The driver drew a deep breath, tried hard to look casual, and said: "She's the one, you know, who murdered old Wainwright five years ago. They put her in the crazy house at Peerton for doing it."

"Murdered!" Kent said. "What is this—the local ghost story?" He paused; then: "Just a minute. He talked as if he was still living with her."

"Look, Mr. Kent"—the man was pitying—"let's not go into why the ghost says what he says. People have tried figuring out what's going on, and have ended with their brains twisted into seventeen knots."

"There must be a natural explanation."

The driver shrugged. "Well, then, you find it." He added: "I was the one who drove Mrs. Carmody and her two kids from Kempster to the farm here. Maybe you'd like to hear as much of the story as I can tell you the rest of the way to the hotel."

Kent sat quietly as gears shifted; and the machine moved heavily off. He turned finally to look at the farm. It was just passing out of sight behind a long spread of trees.

That last look showed—desolation, deadness. He shuddered involuntarily, and did not look again. He said: "This story . . . what about it?"

The woman saw the farm as the car slowed at the lip of the hill. She was dimly aware that the car was in low gear, with brakes on, slithering down the loose gravel of the steep incline.

The farm, she thought with a greedy intensity that shook her heavy body; safety at long, long last. And only a senile old man and a girl standing between her and possession.

Between her—and the hard, sordid years that stretched behind her. Years of being a widow with two children in a tenement house, with only an occasional job to eke out the income from the relief department.

Years of hell!

And here was heaven for the taking. Her hard blue eyes narrowed; her plump, hard body grew taut—if she couldn't take the treasure of security that was here, she'd better—

The thought faded. Fascinated, she stared at the valley farm below, a green farmhouse, a great red barn and half a dozen outhouses. In the near distance a vast field of wheat spread; tiny wheat, bright green with a mid-spring greenness.

The car came down to the level of the valley; and trees hid the distant, rolling glory of the land. The automobile came to a stop, its shiny front pointed at the gate; and, beside her, the heavily built boy said:

"This it, ma?"

"Yes, Bill!" The woman looked at him anxiously. All her ultimate plans about this farm centered around him. For a moment she was preternaturally aware of his defects, his sullen, heavy, yet not strong face. There was a clumsiness of build in his chunky, sixteen-year-old body that made him something less than attractive.

She threw off that brief pattern of doubt; she ventured: "Isn't it wonderful?"

"Naw!" The thick lips twisted. "I'd rather be in the city." He shrugged. "But I guess I know what's good for us."

"That's right." She felt relieved. "In this world it's what you get, not what you want. Remember that, Bill . . . what is it, Pearl?"

She spoke impatiently. It was the way her daughter always affected her. What good was a pasty-faced, twelve-year-old, too plump, too plain, and without the faintest promise of ever being pretty. With an even sharper annoyance, the woman repeated:

"What is it?"

"There's a skinny old man coming across the field. Is that Mr. Wainwright, ma?"

Mrs. Carmody turned slowly and stared in the direction Pearl was pointing. And, after a moment, a current of relief surged through her. Until this instant she had felt a sharp edge of worry about the old man. Old, her sister-in-law had written in her occasional letter. But she hadn't imagined he'd be this old. Why, he must be ninety, a hundred; utterly no danger to her at all.

She saw that the driver had opened the gate, and was coming back to drive the car through. With a new confidence she raised her voice at him:

"Wait!" she said, "wait for the old man. He's been out for a walk, and he'll be tired. Give him a lift to the house."

Might as well make a good first impression, she thought. Politeness was the watchword. Iron hands within velvet gloves.

It struck her that the driver was staring at her peculiarly; the man said: "I wouldn't count on him driving with us. He's a queer old duck, Mr. Wainwright is. Sometimes he's deaf and blind, and he don't pay attention to no one. And he does a lot of queer things."

The woman frowned. "For instance?"

The man sighed. "Well, ma'am, it's no use trying to explain. You might as well start learning by experience, now as later. Watch him."

The long, thin figure came at an even, slow pace across the pasture to the south. He crossed the road, passing the car less than three feet from the fenders, seemingly completely blind to its presence. He headed straight for the gate.

Not the open gate, wide enough for the car to go through, but the narrow, solidly constructed wooden gate for human beings. He seemed to fumble at some hidden catch. And then—

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The gate did not open, but he stepped through as if it had.

Stepped through the solid wooden gate.

For a long second Mrs. Carmody was aware of a harsh woman's voice screaming. With a terrible shock, she realized it was her own voice.

The effort to choke that wild cry was so horrible that she fell back against the seat, the blood hammering at her temples. She sagged there, sick, cold as ice, her vision blurred, her throat ash dry, every muscle in her body jumping with tiny, painful surges of nervous convulsion; and, for a long moment, her mind wouldn't hold thoughts.

"Just a minute!" Kent interrupted the driver. "I thought you told me the old man was alive at this time. How come he walked through the gate?"

His narrator stared at him strangely: "Mr. Kent, the only reason that old man hasn't made us all crazy these past twelve years is that he's harmless. He walked through gates when he was alive just as he does now. And not only gates. The difference is that we know we buried him. Maybe he's always been a ghost, and killing him don't do no good. All we know is, he's harmless. That's enough, isn't it?".

Kent nodded, but there was a world of doubt in his voice as he said:

"I suppose so; anyway, go on."

The dark blur of fear in the woman's mind yielded to an awareness of tugging at her arm; and then she realized that the driver was speaking:

"It's all right, ma'am, he's just a queer, harmless old man. Nothing to get excited about."

It was not the driver, but the boy beside her, whose words pulled her together; the boy saying rather scornfully:

"Gee, ma, you sure take on. I seen a trick like that on the stage last year, only it was better than that. It don't mean a thing."

The woman began to feel better. Bill was such a solid, practical boy, she thought gratefully. And of course he was right. Some trick, of course, and—what was that stupid little fool of a girl saying. She found herself repeating the question out loud:

"What did you say, Pearl?"

"He sees us, ma—look!" the girl said.

The woman saw that the old man was peering at her over the gate. A thin, long, gentle, wrinkled face it was, bright with gathering interest. He said with an astonishingly crisp voice for one so old:

"You're back from town rather early, Mrs. Carmody. Does that mean an early dinner?"

He paused politely; then: "I have no objection naturally. I am only too happy to fit myself into any routine you desire."

The deadly thought that came to her was that she was being made ridiculous in some way. Her face grew taut, her eyes narrowed, then she mustered an uncertain smile, and tried to force her mind past his words. The fierce whisper of the driver rescued her from that developing confusion:

"Begging your pardon, ma'am," the man said hurriedly, "don't let on you're new here. He's got the gift of seeing, and he's been acting for months as if you were already living here, and, if you contradict him, it only puzzles him. Toward the end, he was actually calling Mrs. Wainwright by your name. He's just a queer old man."

Mrs. Carmody sat very still, her blue eyes brighter, wide with abrupt calculation. The thrill that came was warm along her nerves. Expected!

One of the several things she had feared was this moment of her arrival; but now—expected!

All her careful preparation would go over smoothly. The letter she had forged so painstakingly, in which the dead woman, the old man's granddaughter, *asked* her to come to look after her daughter, Phyllis—that prize letter would merely be a confirmation of something which had already been accepted as inevitable. Though how—

The woman shook herself firmly. This was no time to worry about the curious actions of an old man. She had a farm to take over; and the quicker that problem was solved, the better.

She smiled again, her thick face smirking a little with the comfortable glow of her inner triumph.

"Won't you ride to the house with us, Mr. Wainwright? You must be tired after your walk."

The old fellow nodded alertly. "Don't mind if I do, madam. I was all the way to Kempster, and I'm a little tired. Saw your sister there, by the way."

He had come through the gate, this time the one that was standing open for the car, and he was heading for the front door of the machine when Mrs. Carmody managed heavily:

"My—sister?"

"Sssshh!" hissed the driver. "Pay no attention. He's mixed up in his head. He thinks everyone of us has a living image, and he's always meeting them. He's been like this for years, perfectly harmless."

It was easier to nod this time. The episode of the gate was a vague unreality in her mind, becoming dimmer by the minute. She smiled her smile as the old man politely lifted his hat, watched as he climbed into the front seat beside the driver.

The car puffed along the yard road, rounded the house and drew up before the veranda. A girl in a white dress came to the screen door, and stood there very quietly staring at them.

She was a pretty, fragile thing, Mrs. Carmody

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noted with a sharp eye to detail, slim, with yellow hair, about fifteen or sixteen, and—the woman's mind tightened—not very friendly.

The woman smiled sweetly. "Hello, Phyllis," she said, "I'm so glad to see you."

"Hello," said Phyllis; and the older woman smiled comfortably at the reluctant greeting. Because—it *had* been a greeting. It was acceptance of a sort.

The woman smiled a thin smile to herself. This simple country girl was going to learn how impossible it was to fight a friendly approach, backed by an iron purpose.

She could see the whole future smoothly fitting in with her wishes. First, to settle down; then to set about throwing Bill and Phyllis together, so that they'd consider marriage a natural and early conclusion to their relationship. And then—

It was night; and she had blown out the lamp in the master bedroom before she thought again of the old man, and the astounding things he had said and done.

She lay in the darkness, nestling into the special comfort of the great bed, frowning. Finally, sleepily, she shrugged. Harmless, the driver had said. Well, he'd better stay that way, the old coot.

Mrs. Carmody wakened the following morning to the sounds of movement downstairs. She dressed hurriedly with a sense of having been outmaneuvered on her first day; and that empty feeling became conviction when she saw the old

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man and Phyllis eating breakfast.

There were three other plates set with bowls of cereal; and Mrs. Carmody sank down before one of them in a dead silence. She saw that the girl had a notebook open in front of her; and she clutched at the straw of conversation it offered.

"Doing your homework?" she asked in her friendliest voice.

"No!" said the girl, closing the notebook and getting up from the table.

Mrs. Carmody sat very still, fighting the surge of dull color that crept up into her cheeks. No use getting excited, she thought. The thing was, somehow—somehow she had to make friends with this quiet girl.

And besides, there was some information she had to have—about food, about the house, about—money.

Abruptly, breakfast was a meaningless, tasteless act. She got up from her half-finished cereal; in the kitchen she found Phyllis washing the dishes.

"Let me wash," said the woman, "you dry."

She added: "Pretty hands like yours shouldn't be in dish water."

She sent a swift glance at the girl's face, and spoke for the third time: "I'm rather ashamed of myself for getting up so late. I came here to work, not to rest."

"Oh, you'll get used to it," said the girl; and Mrs. Carmody smiled her secret smile. The dangerous silence strike was over. She said:

"What about food? Is there any particular store where you buy it? Your mother didn't mention such details in her letter. I—"

She stopped, startled in spite of herself at that mention of the letter. She stood for a moment, hands rigid in the hot water; then forced on:

"Your poor mother! It was such a tired letter she wrote. I cried when I read it."

From under half-closed eyes she saw that the girl's lips were trembling—and she knew her victory. She had a brief, blazing exultation at the way every word, every mood of this moment was under her control. She said swiftly:

"We can talk about those details later."

The girl said tearfully: "We have a charge account at Graham's General Store in Agan. You can phone up. He delivers this far."

The woman walked hurriedly into the dining room to get the dishes that were still there, and to hide the irrepressible light of triumph in her eyes. A charge account! The problem of obtaining control of the money had actually made her feel sick, the consciousness that legal steps might be necessary, the conviction that she must first establish herself in the household and in the community.

And here was her stepping-stone: a charge account! Now, if this Graham's store would only accept her order—what was the girl saying?

"Mrs. Carmody, I want to apologize for not answering your question about my notebook at breakfast. You see, the neighbors always want to know what great-grandfather says about them; so, at breakfast, when he's strongest, I ask him questions, and take notes. I pretend to him that I'm going to write a book about his life when I grow up. I couldn't explain all that in front of him, could I?"

"Of course not," said the woman. She thought sharply: So the neighbors were interested in the old man's words about them. They'd be interested and friendly with anyone who kept them supplied with the latest titbits of news. She'd have to keep her ears open, and perhaps keep a notebook herself.

She grew aware that the girl was speaking again: "I've been wanting to tell you, great-grandpa really has the gift of seeing. You won't believe that yet, but—"

The girl's eyes were bright, eager; and the woman knew better than to let such enthusiasm pass.

"Why, of course, I believe it," she said. "I'm not one of these skeptics who won't face facts. All through history there have been people with strange powers; and besides, didn't I see with my own eyes Mr. Wainwright step through a solid gate. I—"

Her voice faltered; her own words describing that incredible action brought a vivid return of reality, and she could only finish weakly: "Of course, I believe it."

"What I meant, Mrs. Carmody," the girl was saying, "don't be offended if he seems to say something unpleasant. He always thinks he's talking about events that have already happened, and then, of course, there's the way he talks about your sister, if you're a woman, and your brother if you're a man. It's really you he means."

Really you—

The woman's mind spun curiously; and the memory of the words stayed with her after the girl had ridden off to school, even after Graham's accepted her order on behalf of the Wainwright farm with a simple, utterly effective: "Oh, yes, Mrs. Carmody, we know about you."

It was not until nearly noon that she went out onto the porch, where the old man was sitting, and asked the question that had been quivering in her mind:

"Mr. Wainwright, yesterday you mentioned you had seen my sister in Kempster. W-what did she have to say?"

She waited with a tenseness that startled her; and there was the queer thought that she was being utterly ridiculous. The old man took his long pipe out of his mouth, thoughtfully. He said:

"She was coming out of the courthouse, and—"

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"Courthouse!" said Mrs. Carmody.

The old man was frowning to himself. "She didn't speak to me, so I cannot say what she was doing there." He finished politely: "Some little case, no doubt. We all have them."

Kent was aware of the car slowing. The driver nodded at a two-story wooden building with a veranda, and said:

"That's the hotel. I'll have to leave you now and do some chores. I'll finish that story for you some other time. Or, if I'm too busy, just ask anyone. The whole district knows all about it."

The following morning the sun peered with dazzling force into his hotel room. Kent walked to the window and stared out over the peaceful village.

For a moment there was not a sound audible. The little spread of trees and houses lay almost dreamily under the blue, blue sky.

Kent thought quietly: He had made no mistake in deciding to spend the rest of the summer here, while, in a leisurely fashion, he carried on negotiations for the sale of the farm his parents had left him. Truth was he had been overworking.

He went downstairs and amazed himself by eating two eggs and four slices of bacon in addition to cereal and toast. From the dining room he walked to the veranda—and there was the ghost sitting in one of the wicker chairs.

Kent stopped short. The tiny beginning of a chill formed at the nape of his spine; then the old man saw him and said:

"Good morning, Mr. Kent. I should take it very kindly if you would sit down and talk with me. I need cheering up."

It was spoken with an almost intimate pathos; and yet Kent had a sudden sense of being beyond his depth. Somehow the old man's friendliness of the day before had seemed unreal.

Yet here it was again.

He shook himself. After all, part of the explanation at least was simple. Here was an old man—that ghost part was utterly ridiculous, of course—an old man, then, who could foretell the future. Foretell it in such a fashion that, in the case of Mrs. Carmody, he, the old man, had actually had the impression that she had been around for months before she arrived.

Apparently, he had had the same impression about Kent. Therefore—

"Good morning, Mr. Wainwright!" Kent spoke warmly as he seated himself. "You need cheering up, you say. Who's been depressing you?"

"Oh!" The old man hesitated, his finely lined face twisted into a faint frown. He said finally, slowly. "Perhaps, it is wrong of me to have mentioned it. It is no one's fault, I suppose. The friction of daily life, in this case Mrs. Carmody pestering me about what her sister was doing in court."

Kent sat silent, astounded. The reference of the old man to the only part of the story that he, Kent, knew, was—shattering. His brain recoiled from the coincidence into a tight, corded layer of thoughts:

Was this—alien—creature a mind reader as well as seer and ghost? An old, worn-out brain that had taken on automaton qualities, and reacted almost entirely to thoughts that trickled in from other minds? Or—

He stopped, almost literally pierced by the thought that came: Or was this reference to Mrs. Carmody, this illusion that Mrs. Carmody was still looking after him, one of those fantastic, brain-chilling re-enactments of which the history of haunted houses was so gruesomely replete?

Dead souls, murderess and murdered, doomed through all eternity to live over and over again their lives before and during the crime!

But that was impossible. Mrs. Carmody was still alive; in a madhouse to be sure, but *alive*.

Kent released carefully the breath of air he had held hard in his lungs for nearly a minute. "Why don't you tell her," he said finally, "to ask her sister about what she was doing in court?"

The thin, gray, old face wrinkled into puzzlement. The old man said with a curious dignity:

"It is more complicated than that, Mr. Kent. I have never quite understood the appearance of so many twins in the world during the recent years of my life; and the fact that so many of them are scarcely on speaking terms with each other is additionally puzzling."

He shook his head. "It is all very confusing. For instance, this courtroom appearance of Mrs. Carmody's sister—I seem to remember having heard something else about it, but it must have struck me as unimportant at the time, for I cannot rightly recollect the details. It's not a pleasant situation for a harmless old man to handle."

Harmless! Kent's eyes narrowed involuntarily. That was what people kept saying about—the ghost. First, the driver, Tom; then, according to Tom's story, the girl Phyllis, and now the old man himself.

Harmless, harmless, harmless— Old man, he thought tensely, what about the fact that you drove a woman to murder you? What *is* your purpose? What—

Kent loosened the tight grip his fingers had taken on the arms of the chair. What was the matter with him, letting a thing like this get on his nerves?

He looked up. The sky was as blue as ever; the summer day peaceful, perfect. All was well with the world of reality.

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There was silence, a deep, peaceful quiet during which Kent studied that long, aged face from half-closed eyes. The old man's skin was of a normal grayish texture with many, very many crisscross lines. He had a lean, slightly hawklike nose, and a thin, rather fine mouth.

Handsome, old man; only—that explained nothing, and—

He saw that the old man was rising; he stood for a moment very straight, carefully adjusting his hat on his head; then:

"I must be on my way. It is important, in view of our strained relations, that I do not keep Mrs. Carmody waiting for lunch. I shall be seeing you again, Mr. Kent."

Kent stood up, a little, fascinated thought in his mind. He had intended to walk over to the farm that had belonged to his parents and introduce himself to the tenants. But that could wait.

Why not go with the—ghost—to the deserted Wainwright place, and—

What?

He considered the question blankly; then his lips tightened. After all, this mysterious business was on his mind. To let it go would be merely to have a distraction at the back of his head, sufficient perhaps to interfere with anything he might attempt. Besides, there was no rush about the business. He was here for a rest and change as much as anything.

He stood there, still not absolutely decided, chilled by a dark miasma of mind stuff that welled up inside him:

Wasn't it perhaps dangerous to accompany a ghost to a hide-out in an isolated, old house?

He pressed the clammy fear out of his system because—it wasn't Mrs. Carmody who had been killed. She was out of her head, yes; but the danger was definitely mental, not physical, and—

His mind grew hard, cool. No sudden panic, no totality of horrendous threats or eerie menaces would actually knock his reason off its base. Therefore—

Kent parted his lips to call after the old man, who was gingerly moving down the wooden walk to the wooden sidewalk. Before he could speak, a deep voice beside him said:

"I noticed you were talking to the ghost, Mr. Kent."

Kent turned and faced a great, gross fat man whom he had previously noticed sitting in a little office behind the hotel desk. Three massive chins quivered as the man said importantly:

"My name is Jenkins, sir, proprietor of the Agan Hotel."

His pale, deep-set eyes peered at Kent. "Tom was telling me that you met our greatest local character yesterday. A very strange, uncanny case. Very uncanny."

The old man was farther up the street now, Kent saw, an incredibly lean, sedately moving figure, who vanished abruptly behind a clump of trees. Kent stared after him, his mind still half on the idea of following as soon as he could reasonably break away from this man.

He took another look at the proprietor; and the man said heavily:

"I understand from Tom that he didn't have time to finish the story of what happened at the Wainwright farm. Perhaps I could complete the uncanny tale for you."

It struck Kent that the word "uncanny" must be a favorite with this dark mountain of flesh.

It struck him, too, that he would have to postpone his visit to the ghost farm, or risk offending his host.

Kent frowned and yielded to circumstances. It wasn't actually necessary to trail the old man today. And it might be handy to have all the facts first, before he attempt to solve the mystery. He seated himself after watching the fat man wheeze into a chair. He said:

"Is there any local theory that would explain the"—he hesitated—"uncanny appearance of the ghost. You do insist that he is a ghost, in spite of his substantial appearance."

"Definitely a ghost!" Jenkins grunted weightily. "We buried him, didn't we? And unburied him again a week later to see if he was still there; and he was, dead and cold as stone. Oh, yes, definitely a ghost. What other explanation could there be?"

"I'm not," said Kent carefully, "not exactly—a believer—in ghosts."

The fat man waved the objection aside with a flabby hand. "None of us were, sir, none of us. But facts are facts."

Kent sat silent; then: "A ghost that tells the future. What kind of future? Is it all as vague as that statement of his to Mrs. Carmody about her sister coming out of the courthouse?"

Sagging flesh shook as Mr. Jenkins cleared his throat. "Mostly local events of little importance, but which would interest an old man who lived here all his life."

"Has he said anything about the war?"

"He talks as if it's over, and therefore acts as if the least said the better." Mr. Jenkins laughed a great husky, tolerant laugh. "His point about the war is amazement that prices continue to hold up. It confuses him. And it's no use keeping after him, because talking tires him easily, and he gets a persecuted look. He did say something about American armies landing in northern France, but"—he shrugged—"we all know that's going to happen, anyway."

Kent nodded. "This Mrs. Carmody—she arrived when?"

"In 1933, nearly nine years ago."

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"And Mr. Wainwright has been dead five years?"

The fat man settled himself deeper into his chair. "I shall be glad," he said pompously, "to tell you the rest of the story in an orderly fashion. I shall omit the first few months after her arrival, as they contained very little of importance—"

The woman came exultantly out of the Wholesale Marketing Co. She felt a renewal of the glow that had suffused her when she first discovered this firm in Kempster two months before.

Four chickens and three dozen eggs—four dollars cash.

Cash!

The glow inside her dimmed. She frowned darkly. It was no use fooling herself; now that the harvesting season was only a week away, this makeshift method of obtaining money out of the farm couldn't go on— Her mind flashed to the bank book she had discovered in the house, with its tremendous information that the Wainwrights had eleven thousand seven hundred thirty-four dollars and fifty-one cents in the Kempster Bank.

An incredible fortune, so close yet so far away—

She stood very still in front of the bank finally, briefly paralyzed by a thought dark as night. If she went in—in minutes she'd know the worst.

This time it wouldn't be an old, old man and a young girl she'd be facing. It would be—

The banker was a dapper little fellow with horn-rimmed glasses, behind which sparkled a large pair of gray eyes.

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Carmody!" The man rubbed his fingers together. "So it finally occurred to you to come and see me."

He chuckled. "Well, well, we can fix everything; don't worry. I think between us we can manage to look after the Wainwright farm to the satisfaction of the community and the court, eh?"

Court! The word caught the woman in the middle of a long, ascending surge of triumph. So this was it. This was what the old man had prophesied. And it was good, not bad.

She felt a brief, ferocious rage at the old fool for having frightened her so badly—but the banker was speaking again:

"I understand you have a letter from your sister-in-law, asking you to look after Phyllis and the farm. It is possible such letter is not absolutely necessary, as you are the only relative, but in lieu of a will it will constitute a definite authorization on the basis of which the courts can appoint you executrix."

The woman sat very still, almost frozen by the words. Somehow, while she had always felt that she would in a crisis produce the letter she had forged, now that the terrible moment was here—

She felt herself fumbling in her purse, and there was the sound of her voice mumbling some doubt about the letter still being around. But she knew better.

She brought it out, took it blindly from the blank envelope where she had carefully placed it, handed it toward the smooth, reaching fingers—and waited her doom.

As he read, the man spoke half to himself, half to her: "Hm-m-m, she offers you twenty-five dollars a month over and above expenses—"

The woman quivered in every muscle of her thick body. The incredibly violent thought came that she must have been mad to put such a thing in the letter. She said hurriedly: "Forget about the money. I'm not here to—"

"I was just going to say," interrupted the banker, "that it seems an inadequate wage. For a farm as large and wealthy as that of the Wainwrights', there is no reason why the manager should not receive fifty dollars, at least, and that is the sum I shall petition the judge for."

He added: "The local magistrate is having a summer sitting this morning just down the street, and if you'll step over there with me we can have this all settled shortly."

He finished: "By the way, he's always interested in the latest predictions of old Mr. Wainwright."

"I know them all!" the woman gulped.

She allowed herself, a little later, to be shepherded onto the sidewalk. A brilliant, late July sun was pouring down on the pavement. Slowly, it warmed the chill out of her veins.

It was three years later, three undisturbed years. The woman stopped short in the task of running the carpet sweeper over the living-room carpet, and stood frowning. Just what had brought the thought into her mind, she couldn't remember, but—

Had she seen the old man, as she came out of the courthouse that July day three years before, when the world had been handed to her without a struggle.

The old man had predicted that moment. That meant, in some way, he must have seen it. Had the picture come in the form of a vision? Or as a result of some contact in his mind across the months? Had he in short been physically present; and the scene had flashed back through some obscure connection across time?

She couldn't remember having seen him. Try as she would, nothing came to her from that moment but a sort of blurred, enormous contentment.

The old man, of course, thought he'd been there. The old fool believed that everything he ever spoke about was memory of his past. What a dim, senile world that past must be.

It must spread before his mind like a road over which shifting tendrils of fog drifted, now thick

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and impenetrable, now thin and bright with flashing rays of sunlight—and pictures.

Pictures of events.

Across the room from her she was vaguely aware of the old man stirring in his chair. He spoke:

"Seems like hardly yesterday that Phyllis and that Couzens boy got married. And yet it's—"

He paused; he said politely: "When was that, Pearl? My memory isn't as good as it was, and—"

The words didn't actually penetrate the woman. But her gaze, in its idle turning, fastened on plump Pearl—and stopped. The girl sat rigid on the living-room couch, where she had been sprawling. Her round, baby eyes were wide.

"Ma!" she shrilled. "Did you hear that? Grandpa's talking like Phyllis and Charlie Couzens are married."

There was a thick, muffled sound of somebody half choking. With a gulp the woman realized that it was she who had made the sound. Gasping, she whirled on the old man and loomed over him, a big, tight-lipped creature, with hard blue eyes.

For a moment, her dismay was so all-consuming that words wouldn't come. The immensity of the catastrophe implied by the old man's statement scarcely left room for thought. But—

Marriage!

And she had actually thought smugly that Bill and Phyllis— Why, Bill had told her and—

Marriage! To the son of the neighboring farmer. Automatic end to her security. She had nearly a thousand dollars, but how long would that last, once the income itself stopped?

Sharp pain of fear released the explosion that, momentarily, had been dammed up by the sheer fury of her thoughts:

"You old fool, you!" she raged. "So you've been sitting here all these years while I've been looking after you, scheming against me and mine. A trick, that's what it is. Think you're clever, eh, using your gift to—"

It was the way the old man was shrinking that brought brief, vivid awareness to the woman of the danger of such an outburst after so many years of smiling friendliness. She heard the old man say:

"I don't understand, Mrs. Carmody. What's the matter?"

"Did you say it?" She couldn't have stopped the words to save her soul.

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"Did I say what?"

"About Phyllis and that Couzens boy—"

"Oh, them!" He seemed to forget that she was there above him. A benign smile crept into his face. He said at last quietly: "It seems like hardly yesterday that they were married—"

For a second time he became aware of the dark, forbidding expression of the woman who towered above him.

"Anything wrong?" he gasped. "Has something happened to Phyllis and her husband?"

With a horrible effort the woman caught hold of herself. Her eyes blazed at him with a slate-blue intensity.

"I don't want you to talk about them, do you understand? Not a word. I don't want to hear a word about them."

The old man stirred, his face creasing into a myriad extra lines of bewilderment. "Why, certainly, Mrs. Carmody, if you wish, but my own great-granddaughter—"

He subsided weakly as the woman whipped on Pearl: "If you mention one word of this to Phyllis, I'll . . . you know what I'll do to you."

"Oh, sure, ma," Pearl said. "You can trust me, ma."

The woman turned away, shaking. For years there had been a dim plan in the back of her mind, to cover just such a possibility as Phyllis wanting to marry someone else.

She twisted her face with distaste and half fear, and brought the ugly thing out of the dark brain corridor where she had kept it hidden.

Her fingers kept trembling as she worked. Once she saw herself in the mirror over the sink—and started back in dismay at the distorted countenance that reflected there.

That steadied her. But the fear stayed, sick surge after sick surge of it. A woman, forty-five, without income, in the depths of the depression. There was Federal relief, of course, but they wouldn't give that to her till the money was gone. There was old-age pension—twenty-five years away.

She drew a deep breath. Actually, those were meaningless things, utter defeats. Actually, there was only her desperate plan—and that required the fullest co-operation from Bill.

She studied Bill when he came in from the field at lunch. There had been a quietness in him this last year or so that had puzzled her. As if, at twenty, he had suddenly grown up.

He looked like a man; he was strongly built, of medium height with lines of dark passion in his rather heavy face.

That was good, that passion; undoubtedly, he had inherited some of her own troubled ambition—and there was the fact that he had been caught stealing just before they left the city, and released with a warning.

She hadn't blamed him then, felt only his bitter fury against a world that lashed out so cruelly against boys ruthlessly deprived by fate of spending money.

That was all over, of course. For two years he had been a steady, quiet worker, pulling his full share with the other hired men. Nevertheless—

To get Phyllis, that earlier, harder training would surely rise up once more—and win for all of them.

Slyly, she watched as, out of the corner of his eyes, he took one of his long, measured glances at Phyllis, where she sat across the table slantwise from him. For more than a year now, the woman had observed him look at Phyllis like that—and besides she had asked him, and—

Surely, a young man of twenty would fight to get the girl he loved.

Fight unscrupulously. The only thing was—

How did a mother tell her son the particular grim plan that was in her mind? Did she . . . she just tell him?

After lunch, while Phyllis and Pearl were washing the dishes, the woman softly followed Bill up to his room. And, actually, it was easier than she had thought.

He lay for a while, after she had finished, staring at the ceiling; his heavy face was quiet almost placid. Finally:

"So the idea is that this evening you take Pearl in to Kempster to a movie; the old man, of course, will sleep like a log. But after Phyllis goes to bed at her usual time, I go into her room—and then she'll have to marry me."

It was so baldly put that the woman shrank, as if a mirror had been held up to her; and the image was an incredibly evil, ravaged thing. The cool voice went on:

"If I do this it means we'll be able to stay on the farm, is that right?"

She nodded, because no words would come. Then, not daring to stay a moment longer, she turned and left the room.

Slowly, the black mood of that interview passed. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when she came out onto the veranda; and the old man looked up from his chair, and said:

"Terrible thing," he said, "your sister hanged. They told me at the hotel. Hanged. Terrible, terrible; you've been right to have nothing to do with her."

He seemed to forget her, simply sat there staring into space.

The whole thing was utterly unreal, and, after a moment, quite unthinkably fantastic. The woman stared at him with a sudden, calm, grim understanding of the faint smile that was creeping back into his face, a serene smile.

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So that was his plan, she thought coolly. The mischievous old scoundrel intended that Phyllis should not marry Bill. Therefore, knowing his own reputation for prophecy, he had cleverly told her that Phyllis and Charlie Couzens—

That was his purpose. And now he was trying to scare her into doing nothing about it. Hanging indeed. She smiled, her thick face taut with inward anger.

He was clever—but not clever enough.

In the theater she had a curious sense of chattering voices and flickering lights. Too much meaningless talk, too much light.

Her eyes hurt and, afterward, when they came out onto the pale dimness of Kempster's main street, the difference—the greater darkness—was soothing.

She must have said, "Pearl, let's go in and have a banana split."

She must have said that or agreed to it because after a while they were sitting at a little table; and the ice cream was cold as it went into her mouth; and there was a taste of banana.

Her mind held only a variation of one tense thought: If she and Bill could put this over, the world was won. Nothing thereafter could ever damage them to the same dreadful degree as this could.

"Aw, gee, ma, I'm sleepy. It's half past eleven."

The woman came to reality with a start. She looked at her watch; and it was true. "Goodness gracious!" she exclaimed with artificial amazement. "I didn't realize—"

The moon was shining, and the horse anxious to get home. Coming down the great hill, she could see no light anywhere in the house. The buildings loomed silent in the moonlit darkness, like great semiformless shapes against the transparent background of the land.

She left Pearl to unhitch the animal and, trembling, went into the house. There was a lamp in the kitchen turned very low. She turned it into brightness, but the light didn't seem to help her feet on the stairs. She kept stumbling, but she reached the top, reached Bill's door. Ever so softly, she knocked.

No answer.

She opened the door. The pale, yellow light of the lamp poured onto the empty bed—and it was only the sound of Pearl coming into the kitchen downstairs that made her close hastily the door of Bill's room. Pearl came up, yawning, and disappeared instantly into her own room.

The fat man stopped abruptly as a distant telephone thrummed. He rolled apologetically out of his seat. "I'll be right back," he said.

"One question," Kent asked hastily. "What about this prophecy of hanging? I thought Mrs. Carmody was in a madhouse, very much alive."

"She is." The vast bulk of the hotel proprietor filled the door. "We figured out that the old man was definitely trying to put something over."

The minutes dragged. Kent took his notebook and wrote with the elaborate ornateness of vague purpose:

An old man
Who can tell the future
Who caused a woman to murder him
But still lives
Who walks through solid objects
Who reads minds (possibly)

He sat thoughtful, then added to the list:

A senile ghost

For long minutes he stared at the combination. Finally, he laughed ruefully—and simultaneously grew aware of the clicking of pool balls inside.

He stood up, peered through the door—and smiled sardonically as he saw that fat Jenkins was playing a game of snooker with a chunky man of his own age.

Kent shrugged; and, turning, went down the steps. It was obvious that he would have to get the rest of this story piecemeal, here and there over the countryside; obvious, too, that he'd better write Miss Kincaid to send him some books on ghosts and seers, the folklore as well as anything remotely scientific.

He'd need everything he could lay his hands on if he was going to solve the mystery of—the ghost!

The books kept trickling in over a period of four weeks. Miss Kincaid sent ghost stories, compilations of true ghost tales, four books on psychic phenomena, a history of magic, a treatise on astrology and kindred arts, the works of Charles Fort; and, finally, three thin volumes by one J. W. Dunne, on the subject of time.

Kent sat on the veranda in the early morning just after the arrival of the mail that had brought them, and read the three books in one sitting, with an excitement that gathered at every page.

He got up at last, shaky, and half convinced that he had the tremendous answer; and yet—there were things to clear up—

An hour later he was lying in a little wooded dell that overlooked the house and yard, waiting. It was almost time for the—ghost—to come out, if he intended to take his morning walk—

At noon Kent returned to the hotel, thinking tensely: The old man must have gone somewhere else today . . . somewhere else—

His mind nearly came out of his head from contemplating that somewhere else. The following morning, eight o'clock found him in his little

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copse, waiting. Again, the old man failed to appear.

The third morning, Kent's luck was better. Dark, threatening clouds rode the sky as he watched the thin, tall figure move from behind the house and slowly approach the gate. The old man came across the field; Kent showed himself in plenty of time, striding along out of the bush as if he, too, was out for a walk.

"Hello, there, Mr. Wainwright," he said.

The old man came closer without answering, and Kent saw that the man was peering at him curiously. The old man stopped.

"Do I know you, young sir?" he asked politely.

For the barest moment Kent was thrown mentally off balance; and then—

"Good heavens!" he thought excitedly, "even this fits. It *fits*. There had to be a time when he met me."

Aloud, he explained patiently that he was the son of Angus Kent, and that he had come back to the district for a visit. When he had finished the old man said:

"I shall be glad to come to the hotel and talk about your father. It is a pleasure to have met you."

He walked off. The moment he was out of sight, Kent started toward the gate. The first drops of rain fell as he crawled laboriously under the wire. He stood just inside the gate, hesitant. It was important that he get inside the house before the old man, driven by the rain, returned.

The question was, would he have time?

He hurried toward the buildings, glancing over his shoulders every few seconds, expecting to see that long form come into sight.

The house stood quietly under the soft, glinting rain. The weight of the neglectful years lay heavily on its wooden walls. A burst of rain whipped into Kent's face, and then thudded dully on the wood as he ducked into the shelter of the building.

He stood there waiting for the blast to die down. But, as the seconds passed, and there was no abatement, he peered around the corner and saw the veranda.

He reached the safety it offered; and then, more leisurely, investigated the two boarded windows and the boarded door. They were solid, and, though he had expected it, the reality brought a stab of disappointment.

Getting inside was going to be a tough job.

The rain became a thin splatter; and he went hastily down the steps, and saw that there was an open balcony on the second floor. It was hard work climbing, but the effort proved its worth.

A wide, loose board on one of the two balcony windows came off with a jerk, and made it easy to tear off the rest. Beyond was a window, locked.

Kent did not hesitate. He raised one of the boards and, with a single sharp blow, struck. The glass shattered with a curious, empty tinkling sound.

He was inside. The room was empty, dusty, dark, unfurnished. It led out onto a long, empty hallway, and a line of empty, dark rooms.

Downstairs it was the same; empty rooms, unlived in. The basement was dark, a cemented hole. He fumbled around it hurriedly, lighting matches; and then hurriedly went back to the ground floor. There were some cracks in the boards that covered the downstairs windows and, after locating the likeliest ones, he stationed himself at the one that faced the gate—and waited.

It didn't take long.

The old man came through the gate, toward the house. Kent shifted to a window at the side of the house, then at the back; and each time the old man came into view after a moment.

Kent raced to the crack he had selected in the veranda window, expecting to see the old man come into sight.

Ten minutes passed; and that tall figure had still to come around the back corner of the house. Slowly, Kent went upstairs, and out onto the balcony.

It was simple hammering the boards back into position, not so simple easing down to the ground.

But he had his fact. Somewhere at the rear of the house the ghost vanished. The problem was—how to prevent that disappearance.

How did one trap the kind of—ghost—that the long-dead Mr. Wainwright had become?

It was the next day, nearly noon. Kent lay well into the field south of the farmhouse. Earlier, he had watched the old man emerge from the gate, and go past his hiding place along the valley. Now—

Through his field glasses Kent watched the long, straight form coming toward him, toward the farm.

Kent emerged casually from the wood and walked along as if he had not seen the other. He was wondering just what his verbal approach should be when the old man hailed him:

"Hello there, Mr. Kent. Out for a walk?"

Kent turned and waited for the aged man to come up to him. He said: "I was just going to go in to Mrs. Carmody, and ask for a drink of water, before heading on to the hotel. If you don't mind, I'll walk with you."

"Not at all, sir," said the old man.

They walked along, Kent consciously more erect, as he tried to match that superb straightness of body. His mind was seething. What *would* happen at the gate? Somewhere along here the old man's body would become less substantial, but—

He couldn't hold the thought. Besides, he'd

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better start laying his groundwork. He said tautly:

"The farm looks rather deserted from here, does it not, Mr. Wainwright?"

Amazingly, the old man gulped; he said almost swiftly: "Have you noticed it, too, Mr. Kent? I have long thought it an illusion on my part, and I have felt rather uneasy about my vision. I have found that the peculiar desolated appearance vanishes as soon as I pass through the gate."

So it was the gate where the change began—He jerked his soaring thought back to earth, listened as the old man said in evident relief:

"I am glad that we both share this illusion, Mr. Kent. It has had me worried."

Kent hesitated, and then very carefully took his field glasses out of their case; and handed them to the old man.

"Try a look through these," he said casually. "Perhaps they will help to break the illusion."

The moment he had given the instrument over, compunction came, a hard, bright pity for the incredible situation he was forcing.

Compunction passed; pity yielded to an almost desperate curiosity. From narrowed eyes he stared at that lined face as the man's thin, bony hands held the glasses up to his face and slowly adjusted the lens.

There was a harsh gasp; and Kent, who had expected it, leaped forward and caught the glasses as they fell toward the ground.

"Why," the old man was quavering, "it's impos-

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sible. Windows boarded up, and"—a wild suspicion leaped into his eyes—"has Mrs. Carmody gone so swiftly?"

"What's wrong, sir?" Kent said, and felt like a villain. But—he *couldn't* let this go now.

The old man was shaking his head. "I must be mad. My eyes . . . my mind . . . not what they used to be—"

"Let's go over," Kent suggested. "I'll get my drink and we'll see what's wrong."

It was important that the old man retain in his wandering mind that he had a companion. The patriarch straightened, said quietly:

"By all means, you shall have your drink, Mr. Kent."

Kent had a sick feeling as he walked beside that tall form across the road to the gate, the empty feeling that he had meddled in human tragedy.

He watched, almost ill with his victory, as the trembling nonagenarian fumbled futilely with the padlocked gate.

He thought, his mind as tight as a drum: For perhaps the first time since this strange, strange phenomena had started, the old man had failed to walk *through* the gate.

"I don't understand it!" the old man said. "This gate locked—why, this very morning, I—"

Kent had been unwinding the wire that held the large gate. "Let's go in here," he said gently.

The dismay of the old man was so pitiful it was dreadful. He stopped and peered at the weeds. Incredulously, he felt the black old wood that was nailed, board on board of it, over one of the windows. His high shoulders began to sag. A haunted expression crept into his face. Paradoxically, he looked suddenly *old*.

He climbed the faded veranda steps with the weariness of unutterable age. And then—

The flashing, terrible realization of the truth struck at Kent in that last instant, as the old man stepped timidly, almost blindly, toward the nailed door.

"Wait!" he shrilled. "Wait!"

His piercing voice died. Where the old man had been was—nothingness.

A thin wind howled with brief mournfulness around the house, rattling the eaves.

He stood alone on that faded, long-unused veranda. Alone with the comprehension that had, in one dreadful kaleidoscope of mind picture, suddenly cleared up—everything.

And, dominating everything else, was the dreadful fear that he would be too late.

He was running, his breath coming in great gulps. A tiny wind caught the dust that his shoes kicked up from the soft roadbed, and whipped it in little, unpleasant gusts around his nostrils.

The vague thought came that it was lucky he had done so much walking the past month; for the exercise had added just enough strength to bring the long, long mile and a half to the hotel within his powers—

A tangy, unpleasant taste of salt was in his mouth as he staggered up the steps. Inside, he was blurrily aware of the man, Tom, staring at him across the counter. Kent gasped:

"I'll give you five dollars if you can pack my things and get me to Kempster in time to catch the twelve-o'clock train. And tell me how to get to the insane asylum at Peerton. For Heaven's sake, make it fast."

The man goggled. "I had the maid pack your things right after breakfast, Mr. Kent. Don't you remember, this is August 17th."

Kent glared at him with a blank horror. *That* prophecy come true. Then what about the other, more awful one—

On the way to Kempster he was vaguely aware of the driver speaking, something about Peerton being a large town, and he'd be able to get a taxi at the station—

From the taxi the asylum showed as a series of long, white buildings, a green, tree-filled inclosure, surrounded by a high iron fence. He was led through an endless, quiet corridor; his mind kept straining past the sedate, white-clothed woman ahead of him. Couldn't she realize this was life and death?

The doctor sat in a little, bright cozy room. He stood up politely as Kent entered, but Kent waited only for the woman to close the door as she went out.

"Sir, you have a woman here named Mrs. Carmody." He paused a fraction of a second to let the name sink in, then rushed on: "Never mind if you can't remember her name. It's true."

The fine, strong face of the white-haired doctor cleared. "I remember the case."

"Look!" said Kent desperately. "I've just found out the truth about that whole affair; and this is what you've got to do—at once:

"Take me to the woman, and I'll assure her, and you assure her, that she has been found innocent, and will be freed. Do you understand?"

"I think," said the doctor quietly, "that you had better begin at the beginning."

Kent had a frantic sense of walls rising up between him and his purpose. "For Heaven's sake, sir, believe me, there's no time. I don't know just how it is supposed to happen, but the prediction that she would be hanged can only come true in—"

"Now, Mr. Kent, I would appreciate—"

"Don't you understand?" Kent yelled. "If that prophecy is not to be fulfilled, you must act. I tell you I have information that will release this woman. And, therefore, *the next few minutes* are the vital ones."

He stopped because the man was frowning at

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him. The doctor said: "Really, Mr. Kent, you will have to calm down. I am sure everything will be all right."

The strained wonder came to Kent, if all sane, be-calm people seemed as maddening as this quiet-spoken doctor.

He thought shakily: "He'd better be careful or they'd be keeping him in here with the rest of the lunatics."

He began to speak, to tell what he'd heard and seen and done. The man kept interrupting him with incisive questions; and, after a while, it came to Kent, that he would actually have to begin at the beginning to fill in the gaps of this fellow's knowledge.

He stopped, sat shaky for a moment, struggling to clear his brain, and then with a tense quietness, began again.

He found himself, as the minutes dragged, listening to his own voice. Every time his words speeded up, or rose in crescendo, he would deliberately slow down and articulate every syllable. He reached the point where the Dunne books came into the story, and—

His mind paused in a wild dismay: Good heavens, would he have to explain the Dunne theory of time with its emphasis on time as a state of mind. The rest was unimportant, but that part—

He grew aware that the doctor was speaking, saying: "I've read several volumes by Mr. Dunne. I'm afraid I cannot accept his theory of multi-dimensional time. I—"

"Listen," said Kent in a tight voice, "picture an old man in his dotage. It's a queer, incoherent mind-world he lives in; strange, frequently unassociated ideas are the normal condition; memory, particularly memory, is unutterably mixed up. And it is in that confused environment that somehow *once* a variation of the Dunne phenomena operated.

"An old man whose time sense has been distorted by the ravages of senility, an old man who walks as easily into the future as you and I walk into the next room."

"What!"

The doctor was on his feet, pacing the rugged floor. He stared at Kent finally.

"Mr. Kent, this is a most extraordinary idea. But still I fail to see why Mrs. Carmody—"

Kent groaned, then with a terrible effort pulled himself together. "Do you remember the murder scene?"

"Vaguely. A domestic tragedy, I believe."

"Listen. Mrs. Carmody woke up the morning after she thought she'd made everything right for herself and her family, and found a note on her dressing table. It had been lying there all night, and it was from her son, Bill.

"In it, he said he couldn't go through with her plan. Besides, he didn't like the farm, so he was going immediately to the city—and in fact he walked to Kempster and caught the train while she was in the theater.

"Among other things, he said in his note that a few days before the old man had acted surprised at seeing him, Bill, still around. The old man talked as if he thought Bill had gone to the city—"

That was what kept stabbing into the woman's mind. The old man, the interfering old man—

He had, in effect, told Bill that he, Bill, had gone to the city, and so in a crisis Bill had gone.

Gone, gone, gone—and all hope with him. Phyllis would marry Charlie Couzens; and what then? What would become of a poor, miserable woman of forty-five?

The old man, she thought, as she went down the stairs from her room, the old man planned it all. Fiendish old man! First, telling Bill about the city, then suggesting who Phyllis was to marry, then trying to scare *her* with that hanging—

Hanging—

The woman stopped short in the downstairs hallway, her blue eyes stark, a strange, burning sensation in her brain. Why—

If all the rest came true, then—*hanging!*

Her mind whirled madly. She crouched for a moment like an animal at bay, cunning in her eyes. They couldn't hang you unless you murdered someone, and—

She'd see that she didn't pull anything so stupid.

She couldn't remember eating breakfast. But there was a memory of her voice asking monotonously:

"Where's Mr. Wainwright?"

"He's gone for a walk, ma. Hey, ma, are you ill?"

Ill! Who asked a silly question like that. It was the old man who'd be ill when she got through with him.

There was a memory, too, of washing the dishes, but after that a strange, dark gap, a living, evil night flooding her mind . . . gone . . . hope . . . Bill . . . damned old man—

She was standing at the screen door for the hundredth time, peering malignantly at the corner of the house where the old man would come into sight—when it happened.

There was the screen door and the deserted veranda. That was one instant. The next, the old man materialized out of the thin air two feet away. He opened the screen door, and then half fell against the door, and slowly crumbled to the ground, writhing, as the woman screamed at him, meaningless words—

"That was her story," Kent said wearily, "that the old man simply fell dead. But the doctor who

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came testified that Mr. Wainwright died of choking, and besides, in her hysteria, Mrs. Carmody told everything about herself, and the various facts taken together combined to discredit her story."

Kent paused, then finished in a queer voice: "It is medically recognized, I believe, that very old people can choke themselves to death by swallowing saliva the wrong way, or by a paralysis of the throat produced by shock—"

"Shock!" The doctor sank back into his chair from which he had half risen. "Man!" he gasped, "are you trying to tell me that your interference with the old man that day caused his abrupt appearance before Mrs. Carmody, and that it was the shock of what he had himself gone through that—"

"I'm trying to tell you," said Kent, "that we've got minutes to prevent this woman from hanging herself. It could only happen if she did do it with her own hands; and it could only happen today, for if we can get there in time to tell her, why, she'll have no incentive. Will you come . . . for Heaven's sake, man—"

The doctor said: "But the prophecy. If this old man actually had this incredible power, how can we hope to circumvent the inevitable?"

"Look!" said Kent, "I influenced the past by an act from the future. Surely, I can change the future by—*but come along!*"

He couldn't take his eyes off the woman. She sat there in her bright little room, and she was still smiling, as she had been when they first came in, a little more uncertainly now, as the doctor talked.

"You mean," she said finally, "that I am to be freed, that you're going to write my children, and they'll come and get me."

"Absolutely!" Kent spoke heartily, but with just the faintest bit of puzzlement in his voice. "I understand your son, Bill, is working in a machine factory, and that he's married now, and that your daughter is a stenographer for the same company."

"Yes, that's true." She spoke quietly—

Afterward, while the doctor's maid was serving Kent a warmed-up lunch, he said frowningly: "I can't understand it. I ought to feel that everything is cleared up. Her children have small jobs, the girl Phyllis is married to that Couzens chap, and is living in his family home. As for Mrs. Carmody—and this is what gets me—I had no impression that she was in danger of hanging herself. She was cheerful; she had her room fixed with dozens of little fancily sewed things, and—"

The doctor said: "The records show that she's been no trouble while she's been here. She's been granted special privileges; she does a lot of sewing— What's the matter?"

Kent wondered grimly if he looked as wild as the thought that had surged into his mind. "Doctor!" he gasped, "there's a psychological angle here that I forgot completely."

He was on his feet. "Doctor, we've got to get to that woman again, tell her she can stay here, tell her—"

There was the sound of a door opening violently, then running footsteps. A man in uniform burst in.

"Doctor, there's a woman just hanged herself, a Mrs. Carmody. She cut her dress into strips and, using the light fixture—"

They had already cut her down when Kent and the doctor arrived. She lay stiff in death, a dark, heavily built woman. A faint smile was fixed on her rigid lips—Kent was aware of the doctor whispering to him:

"No one's to blame, of course. How could we sane people remember that the greatest obsession in her life was security, and that here in this asylum was that security she craved."

Kent scarcely heard. He felt curiously cold; the room seemed remote. In his mind's eye he could see the Wainwright house, empty, nailed-up; and yet for years an old, old man would come out of it and wander over the land before he, too, sank forever into the death that had long ago struck him down.

The time would come when the—ghost—would walk no more.

THE END.

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THE HILL AND THE HOLE

By Fritz Leiber, Jr.

The surveyor's instruments said it was a hill; the little girl said it was a hole. Checking again, the surveyor found there was a hole—very unpleasant sort of hole—

Illustrated by Orban

Tom Digby swabbed his face against the rolled-up sleeve of his drill shirt, and good-naturedly damned the whole practice of measuring altitudes by barometric instruments. Now that he was back at the bench mark, which was five hundred eleven feet above sea level, he could see that his reading for the height of the hill was ridiculously off. It figured out to about four hundred forty-seven feet, whereas the hill, in plain view hardly a quarter of a mile away, was obviously somewhere around five hundred seventy or even five hundred eighty. The discrepancy made it a pit instead of a hill. Evidently either he or the altimeter had been cock-eyed when he'd taken the reading at the hilltop. And since the altimeter was working well enough now, it looked as if he had been the one.

He would have liked to get away early for lunch with Ben Shelley at Beltonville, but he needed this reading to finish off the State oil survey for this Midwestern region. He hadn't been able to spot the sandstone-limestone contact he was looking for anywhere but near the top of this particular hill. So he picked up the altimeter, stepped out of the cool shadow of the barn behind which the bench mark happened to be located, and trudged off. He figured he would be able to finish this little job properly and still be in time for Ben. A grin came to his big, square, youthful face as he thought of how they would chew the fat and josh each other. Ben, like himself, was on the State Geologic Survey.

Fields of shoulder-high corn, dazzlingly green under the broiling sun, stretched away from the hill to the flat horizon. The noonday hush was beginning. Blue-bottle flies droned momentarily around him as he skirted a manure heap and slid between the weather-gray rails of an old fence. There was no movement, save for a vague breeze rippling the corn a couple of fields away and a farmer's car raising a lazy trail of dust far off in the opposite direction. The chunky competent-looking figure of Tom Digby was the only thing with purpose in the whole landscape.

When he had pushed through the fringe of tall, dry-stalked weeds at the base of the hill, he glanced back at the shabby one-horse farm where the bench mark was located. It looked deserted. Then he made out a little tow-headed girl watching him around the corner of the barn, and he remembered having noticed her earlier. He waved, and chuckled when she dodged back out of sight. Sometimes these farmers' kids were mighty shy. Then he started up the hill at a brisker pace, toward where the bit of strata was so invitingly exposed.

When he reached the top, he didn't get the breeze he expected. It seemed, if anything, more stiflingly hot than it had been down below, and there was a feeling of dustiness. He swabbed at his face again, set down the altimeter on a level spot, carefully twisted the dial until the needle stood directly over the mid line of the scale, and started to take the reading from the pointer below. Then his face clouded. He felt compelled to jog-gle the instrument, although he knew it was no use. Forcing himself to work very slowly and methodically, he took a second reading. The result was the same as the first. Then he stood up and relieved his feelings with a fancy bit of swearing, more vigorous, but just as good-natured as the blast he had let off at the bench mark.

Allowing for any possible change in barometric pressure during the short period of his walk up from the bench mark, it still gave the height of the hill as under four hundred fifty. Even a tornado of fantastic proportions couldn't account for such a difference in pressure.

It wouldn't have been so bad, he told himself disgustedly, if he'd been using an old-fashioned aneroid. But a five-hundred-dollar altimeter of the latest design isn't supposed to be temperamental. However, there was nothing to do about it now. It had evidently given its last accurate gasp at the bench mark and gone blooey for good. It would have to be shipped back East to be fixed. And he would have to get along without this particular reading.

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He flopped down for a breather, before starting back. As he looked out over the checkerboard of fields and the larger checkerboard of dirt roads, it occurred to him how little most people knew about the actual dimensions and boundaries of the world they lived in. They looked at straight lines on a map, and innocently supposed they were straight in reality. They might live all their lives believing their homes were in one county, when accurate surveying would show them to be in another. They were genuinely startled if you explained that the Mason-Dixon line had more jags in it than one of those rail fences down there, or if you told them that it was next to impossible to find an accurate and up-to-date detail map of any given district. They didn't know how rivers jumped back and forth, putting bits of land first in one State and then in another. They went along believing that they lived in a world as neat as a geometry-book diagram, while chaps like himself and Ben went around patching the edges together and seeing to it that one mile plus one mile equaled at least something like two miles. Or proving that hills were really hills and not pits in disguise.

It suddenly seemed devilishly hot and close and the bare ground unpleasantly gritty. He tugged at his collar, and unbuttoned it further. Time to be getting on to Beltonville. Couple glasses of iced coffee would go very good. He hitched himself up, and noticed that the little girl had come out from behind the barn again. She seemed to be waving at him now, with a queer, jerky, beckoning movement; but that was probably just the effect of the heat-shimmer rising from the fields. He waved, too, and the movement brought on an abrupt spell of dizziness. A shadow seemed to surge menacingly across the landscape, and he had difficulty in breathing. Then he started down the hill, and pretty soon he was feeling all right again.

"I was a fool to come this far without a hat," he told himself. "This sun will get you, even if you're healthy as a horse. Well, I'm through with this job, anyway."

Something was nagging at his mind, however, as he realized when he got down in the corn again. It was that he didn't like the idea of letting the hill lick him. It occurred to him that he might persuade Ben to come over this afternoon, if he hadn't anything else to do, and get a precise measurement, with alidade and plane table.

When he neared the farm, he saw that the little girl had retreated again to the corner of the barn.

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He gave her a friendly, "Hello." She didn't answer but she didn't run away, either. He became aware that she was staring at him in an intent, appraising way.

"You live here?" he asked, to start a conversation.

She didn't answer the question. After a while, she said in a strangely hungry voice, "What did you want to go down there for?"

"The State hires me to measure land," he replied. He had reached the bench mark and was automatically starting to take a reading, before he remembered that the altimeter was useless. "This your father's farm?" he asked.

Again she didn't answer. She was barefooted, and wore a cotton dress of washed-out blue. The sun had bleached her hair and eyebrows several degrees lighter than her skin, vaguely giving the effect of a photographic negative. Her mouth hung open. Her whole face had a vacuous, yet not exactly stupid expression.

Finally she shook her head solemnly, and said, "You shouldn't 'a' gone down there. You might not have been able to get out again."

"Say, just what are you talking about?" he inquired, humorously puzzled, but keeping his voice gentle so she wouldn't run away.

"The hole," she answered, almost dreamily. "I mean the hole."

Tom Digby felt a shiver run over him. "Sun must have hit me harder than I thought," he told himself.

"You mean there's some sort of pit down that way?" he asked quickly. "Maybe an old well or cesspool hidden in the weeds? Well, I didn't fall in, anyway. Is it on this side of the hill?" He was still on his knees beside the bench mark.

A look of understanding, mixed with a slight disappointment, came over her face. She nodded wisely, and observed, "You're just like papa. He's always telling me there's a hill there, so I won't be scared of the hole. But he doesn't need to. I know all about it, and I wouldn't go near it again for anything."

"Say, what the dickens are you talking about?" His voice got out of control, and he rather boomed the question at her. But she didn't dart away, only continued to stare at him thoughtfully.

"Maybe I've been wrong," she observed finally, as if talking to herself. "Maybe papa and you and other people really do see a hill there. Maybe *They* make you see a hill there, so you won't know about them being there. *They* don't like to be bothered. I know. There was a man come up here about two years ago, trying to find out about them. He had a kind of spyglass on sticks. *They* made him dead. That was why I didn't want you to go down there. I was afraid *They* would do the same thing to you."

He disregarded the shiver that was creeping persistently along his spine, just as he had disregarded from the very beginning, with automatic, scientific distaste for eeriness, the odd coincidence between the girl's fancy and the inaccurate altimeter readings.

He looked at her closely. He had run across mental cases once or twice before in the course of his work, but he also knew that many children like to fabricate nonsense with great seriousness.

"Who are *They?*" he asked cheerfully.

The little girl's blank, watery blue eyes stared past him, as if she were looking at nothing—or everything.

"*They* are dead. Bones. Just Bones. But They move around. They live at the bottom of the hole, and They do things there."

"Yes?" he prompted, feeling a trifle guilty at encouraging her. From the corner of his eye he could see that an old Model-T was chugging up the rutted drive, raising clouds of dust.

"When I was little," she continued in a low trancelike voice, so he had to listen hard to catch the words, "I used to go right up to the edge and look down at them. There's a way to climb down in, but I never did. Then one day *They* looked up and caught me spying. Just white bone faces; everything else black. I knew They were thinking of making me dead. So I ran away and never went back."

The Model-T rattled to a stop beside the garage, and a tall hulk of a man in old blue overalls swung out and strode swiftly toward them.

"School Board sent you over?" he shot brusquely at Tom. It was more an accusation than a question. "You from the County Hospital?"

He clamped his big paw around the girl's hand. He had the same bleached hair and eyebrows, but his face was burnt to a brick red. There was a strong facial resemblance.

"I want to tell you something," he immediately went on, his voice heavy with anger but under control. "My little girl's all right in the head. It's up to me to judge, isn't it? What if she don't always give the answers the teachers expect. She's got a mind of her own, hasn't she? And I'm perfectly fit to take care of her. I don't like the idea of your sneaking around to put a lot of questions to her while I'm gone."

Then his eye fell on the altimeter, and he stopped his tirade. He glanced at Tom sharply, especially at the riding breeches and high, laced boots.

"I guess I went and made a damn fool of myself," he said swiftly. "You an oil man?"

Tom got to his feet. "I'm on the State Geologic Survey," he said guardedly.

The farmer's manner changed completely. He stepped forward, his voice was confidential. "But

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you saw signs of oil here, didn't you?"

Tom shrugged his shoulders and grinned pleasantly. He had heard a hundred farmers ask that same question in the same way. "I couldn't say anything about that. I'd have to finish my mapping before I could make any guesses."

The farmer smiled back, knowingly but not unfriendly. "I know what you mean," he said. "I know you fellows got orders not to talk. So long, mister."

Tom said, "So long," nodded good-by to the little girl, who was still gazing at him steadily, and walked around the barn to his own car. As he plumped the altimeter down on the front seat beside him, he yielded to the impulse to take another reading. Once more he swore, this time under his breath.

The altimeter seemed to be working properly again.

"Well," he told himself, "that settles it. I'll come back and get a reliable alidade reading, if not with Ben, then with somebody else. I'll nail that hill down before I do anything."

Ben Shelley slupped down the last drops of coffee, pushed back from the table, and thumbed tobacco into his battered brier, as Tom explained his proposition for that afternoon.

A wooden-bladed fan was wheezing ponderously overhead, causing pendant strips of fly paper to sway and tremble.

"Hold on a minute," he interrupted near the end. "That reminds me of something I was bringing over for you. May save the trouble." And he fished in his brief case.

"You don't mean to tell me there's some map for this region I didn't know about?" The tragic disgust in Tom's voice was only half jocular. "They swore up and down to me at the office there wasn't."

"Yeah, I'm afraid I mean just that," Ben confirmed, nodding. "Here she is. A special topographic job. Only issued yesterday."

Tom snatched the folded sheet.

"You're right," he proclaimed, a few moments later. "This might have been of some help to me." His voice became sarcastic. "I wonder what they wanted to keep it a mystery for?"

"Oh, you know how it is," said Ben easily. "They take a long time getting maps out. The work for this was done two years ago, before you were on the Survey. It's rather an unusual map, and the person you talked to at the office probably didn't connect it up with your structural job. And there's a yarn about it, which might explain why there was some confuson."

Tom had pushed the dishes away from in front of him and was studying the map intently. Now he gave a muffled exclamation which made Ben look up. Then he hurriedly reinspected the whole map and the printed material in the corner, as though he couldn't believe his eyes. Then he stared at one spot for so long that Ben chuckled and said, "What have you found? A gold mine?"

Tom turned a serious face on him. "Look, Ben," he said slowly. "This map is no good. I've found a terrible mistake in it." Then he added, "It looks as if they did some of the readings by sighting through a rolled-up newspaper as a yardstick." It didn't sound funny, because his face was still serious.

"I knew you wouldn't be happy until you found something wrong with it," said Ben, good-naturedly. "Can't say I blame you. What is it?"

Tom slid the map across to him, indicating one spot with his thumbnail. "Just read that off to me," he directed. "What do you see there?"

Ben paused while he lit his pipe, eying the map. Then he answered promptly, "An elevation of four hundred forty-one feet. And it's got a name lettered in—'The Hole.' Poetic, aren't we? Well, what is it? A stone quarry?"

"Ben, I was out at that very spot this morning," said Tom unsmiling, "and there isn't any depression there at all, but a hill! This reading is merely off some trifle of a hundred and forty feet!"

"Go on," countered Ben. "You were somewhere else this morning. Got mixed up. I've done it myself."

"Impossible," Tom shook his head. "There's a five-hundred-eleven-foot bench mark right next door to it."

"Then you got an old bench mark." Ben was still amusedly skeptical. "You know, one of the pre-Columbus ones."

"Oh, rot. Look, Ben, how about coming out with me this afternoon, and we'll shoot it with your alidade? I've got to do it some time or other, anyway, now that my altimeter's out of whack. And I'll prove to you this map is chock-full of errors. How about it?"

Ben applied another match to his pipe. He nodded. "All right, I'm game. But don't be angry when you find you turned in at the wrong farm."

It wasn't until they were rolling along the highway, with Ben's equipment in the back seat, that Tom remembered something. "Say, Ben, didn't you start to tell me about a yarn connected with this map?"

"It doesn't amount to much really. Just that the surveyor—an old chap named Wolcraftson—died of heart failure while he was still in the field. At first they thought someone would have to re-do the job, but then they found that he had practically completed it. Maybe that explains why some of the people at the office were in doubt as to whether there was such a map."

Tom was concentrating on the road ahead. They were getting near the turn-off. "That would have

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been about two years ago?" he asked. "I mean, when he died."

"Uh-huh. Or two and a half. It happened somewhere around here. Oh, there was some kind of a mess about it. I seem to remember that some fool country coroner—a local Sherlock Holmes—said there were signs of strangulation, or suffocation, or some other awful nonsense, and wanted to hold Wolcraftson's rodman. Of course, we put a stop to that."

Tom didn't answer. Certain words he had heard a couple of hours earlier were coming back to him, just as if a phonograph had been turned on: "Two years ago there was a man come up here, trying to find out about them. He had a kind of spyglass on sticks. *They* made him dead. That's why I didn't want you to go down there. I was afraid They would do the same thing to you."

He angrily shut his ears to those words. If there was anything he detested, it was admitting the possibility of supernatural agencies, even in jest. Anyway what difference did her words make? After all, a man had really died, and it was only natural that her defective imagination should cook up some wild fancy.

Of course, as he had to admit, the screwy entry on the map made one more coincidence, counting the girl's story and the cockeyed altimeter readings as the first. But it was so much of a coincidence. Perhaps Wolcraftson had listened to the girl's prattling and noted down "The Hole" and an approximate reading for it as a kind of private joke, intending to erase it later. Besides, what difference did it make if there *had* been two genuine coincidences? The Universe was full of them. Every molecular collision was a coincidence. You could pile a thousand coincidences on top of another, he averred, and not get Tom Digby one step nearer to believing in the supernatural. Oh, he knew intelligent people enough, all right, who coddled such beliefs. Some of his best friends liked to relate "yarns" and toy with eerie possibilities for the sake of a thrill. But the only emotion Tom ever got out of such stuff was a nauseating disgust. It cut too deep for joking. It was a reversion to that primitive, fear-bound ignorance from which science had slowly lifted man, inch by inch, against the most bitter opposition. Take this silly matter about the hill. Once admit that the dimensions of a thing might not be real, down to the last fraction of an inch, and you cut the foundations from under the world.

He'd be damned, he told himself, if he ever told anyone about the altimeter readings. It was just the silly sort of "yarn" that Ben, for instance, would like to play around with. Well, he'd have to do without it.

With a feeling of relief he turned off for the farm. He had worked himself up into quite an angry state of mind, and part of the anger was at himself, for even bothering to think about such matters. Now they'd finish it off neatly, as scientists should, without leaving any loose ends around for morbid imaginations to knit together.

He led Ben around back of the barn, and indicated the bench mark and the hill. Ben got his bearings, studied the map, inspected the bench mark closely, then studied the map again.

Finally he turned with an apologetic grin. "I've got to admit you're absolutely right. This map is as screwy as a surrealist painting, at least as far as that hill is concerned. I'll go around to the car and get my stuff. We can shoot its altitude from right off the bench mark." He paused, frowning. "Gosh, though, I can't understand how Wolcraftson ever got it so screwed up."

"Probably they misinterpreted something on his original manuscript map."

"I suppose that must have been it."

After they had set up the plane table and telescopelike alidade directly over the bench mark, Tom shouldered the rod, with its inset level and conspicuous markings.

"I'll go up there and be rodman for you," he said. "I'd like you to shoot this yourself. Then they won't have any comeback when you walk into the office and blow them up for issuing such a map."

"O. K.," answered Ben, laughing. "I'll look forward to doing that."

This far they had been alone. Now, as Tom started out, he noticed the farmer coming toward them from the field ahead. He was relieved to see that the little girl wasn't with him, althouh he wouldn't have admitted that even to himself. As they passed one another, the farmer winked triumphantly at him. "Found something worth coming back for, eh?" Tom didn't answer. But the farmer's manner tickled his sense of humor, and he found himself feeling pretty good, all irritation gone, as he stepped along toward the hill.

The farmer introduced himself to Ben by saying, "Found signs of a pretty big gusher, eh?" His pretense at being matter-of-fact wasn't very convincing.

"I don't know anything about it," Ben answered cheerfully. "He just roped me in to help him take a reading."

The farmer cocked his big head and looked sidewise at Ben. "My, you State fellows are pretty close-mouthed, aren't you? Well, you needn't worry, because I *know* there's oil under here. Five years ago a fellow took a drilling lease on all my land at a dollar a year. But then he never showed up again. Course, I know what happened. The big companies bought him out. They know there's oil under here, but they won't drill. Want to keep the price of gasoline up."

Ben made a vaguely affirmative sound, and

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busied himself loading his pipe. Then he sighted through the alidade at Tom's back, for no particular reason. The farmer's gaze swung out in the same direction. When he spoke again it was in a different voice, reminiscent, reflective.

"Well, that's a funny thing now, come to think of it. Right out where he's going, is where that other chap keeled over a couple of years ago."

Ben's interest quickened. "A surveyor named Wolcraftson?" he inquired.

"Something like that. It happened right on top of that hill. They'd been fooling around here all day—something gone wrong with the instruments, the other chap said. Course I knew they'd found signs of oil and didn't want to let on. Along toward evening the old chap—Wolcraftson, like you said—took the pole out there himself—the other chap had done it twice before—and stood atop the hill. It was right then he keeled over. We run out there, but it was too late. Heart got him. He must have thrashed around a lot before he died, though, because he was all covered with dust."

Ben grunted appreciatively. "Wasn't there some question about it afterward?"

"Oh, our coroner made a fool of himself, as he generally does. But I stepped in and told exactly what happened, and that settled it. Say, mister, why don't you break down and tell me what you know about the oil under there?"

Ben's protestations of total ignorance on the subject were cut short by the sudden appearance of a little tow-headed girl from the direction of the road. She seemed to be out of breath as if she had been running. She gasped "Papa!" and grabbed the farmer's hand. Ben walked over toward the alidade. He could see the figure of Tom emerging from the tall weeds and starting up the hill. Then his attention was caught by what the girl was saying.

"You've got to stop him, papa!" She was dragging at her father's wrist. "You can't let him go down in the hole. *They* got it fixed to make him dead, this time."

"Shut your mouth, Sue!" the farmer shouted down at her, but his voice was more anxious than angry. "You'll get me into trouble with the school board, the queer things you say. That man's just going out there to find out how high the hill is."

"But, papa, can't you see?" She twisted away and pointed at Tom's steadily mounting figure. "He's already started down in. *They're* set to trap him. Squattin' down there in the dark, all quiet so he won't hear their bones scrapin' together—stop him, papa!"

With an apprehensive look at Ben, the farmer got down on his knees beside the little girl and put his arms around her. "Look, Sue, you're a big girl now," he argued in a gruff, coaxing voice. "It don't do for you to talk that way. I know you're just playing, but other people don't know you so well. They might get to thinking things. You wouldn't want them to take you away from me, would you?"

And all the while she was twisting from side to side in his arms, trying to catch a glimpse of Tom over his shoulder. Suddenly, with an unexpected backward lunge, she jerked loose and ran off toward the hill. The farmer got to his feet and lumbered after her, calling, "Stop, Sue! Stop!"

Crazy as a couple of hoot owls, Ben decided, watching them go. Both of them think there's something under the ground. One says oil, the other says ghosts. You pay your money and you take your choice.

Then he noticed that during the excitement Tom had gotten to the top of the hill and had the rod up. He hurriedly sighted through the alidade, which was in the general direction of the hilltop. For some reason he couldn't see anything through it—just blackness. He felt forward to make sure the lens cover was off. He swung it around a little, hoping something hadn't dropped out of place inside the tube. Then abruptly, through it, he caught sight of Tom, and involuntarily he uttered a short, frightened cry and jumped away.

Ben's face was pale as death. He was trembling. On the hilltop, Tom was no longer in sight. Ben stood still for a moment, frozen. Then he raced off for it, running at top speed.

He found the farmer looking around perplexedly near the far fence. "Come on," Ben gasped out. "There's trouble," and vaulted over.

When they reached the hilltop, Ben stooped to the sprawling body, then recoiled with a convulsive movement and for a second time uttered a smothered cry and stood motionless. For every square inch of skin and clothes was smeared with a fine, dark-gray dust, totally different from the light-brown soil of the hilltop. And close beside Tom's lifeless hand was a tiny white bone.

Because a certain hideous vision still dominated his memory, Ben needed no one to tell him that it was a bone from a human finger. He buried his face in his hands, fighting that vision.

For what he had seen, or thought he had seen, through the alidade, had been a tiny struggling figure of Tom, buried in darkness, with dim skeletal figures clutching him all around and dragging him down into a thicker blackness.

The farmer kneeled by the body. "Dead as dead," he muttered in a hushed voice. "Just like the other. He's got the stuff fairly rubbed into him. It's even in his mouth and nose. Like he'd been buried in ashes and then dug up again."

From between the rails of the fence, the little girl stared up at them, terrified, but avid.

THE END.

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FIGHTERS NEVER QUIT

By Malcolm Jameson

The dead can't die—so far as we know, but there may well be yet other realms, and battles still to be fought. And if the invisible dead can see the living—

Illustrated by Kramer

Chief Bos'n Jockens was exceedingly annoyed. And as the moments slipped into the seconds, and the seconds into minutes, he became more annoyed. Chagrin was what he felt chiefly, polluted with dismay and disgust. For he was rapidly becoming convinced that he was up to his neck in a situation that simply couldn't happen—not to *anybody*, and least of all him! The bitter pill that the good chief bos'n had to swallow was this: he had become a ghost! And Jockens was one of those feet-on-the-ground people who absolutely did not believe in ghosts. His orations on the subject were well remembered in every W. O. mess in the fleet. Hence his extreme mortification.

It all came about when that big Jap battleship came barging out of the mist and let go with all she had at the already hard-pressed *El Paso*. Five sixteen shells at close range can do plenty to a light cruiser, even if the light cruiser had not already been amply riddled. The *El Paso's* reaction was the simple and obvious one—she shuddered as the lethal lumps of steel tore through her sides, then blew up with a terrific bang. What five tons of hurtling H. E. might not have completed, her own magazines did. Within five seconds all that was left of the gallant cruiser and her crew was a towering mushroom of smoke and a drizzle of splinters and fragments.

Jockens remembered that explosion vaguely, but the force of it had been too vast and so instantly applied as to give no time for sensation. He only knew that he had been hurled upward and that, without his feeling it in the least, his limbs had been ripped off him to disappear in a blast of flame. After that came a brief period when all that remained of him was a sort of disembodied consciousness hovering over a patch of flotsam in the water. Then things began to change subtly.

A couple of feet below him floated the splintered loom of an oar. Sloshing about in the water a yard away was a gruesome object which the late chief bos'n studied with a deep and morbid interest. It was horrible, that thing, being only a torn and blackened portion of a human torso to which the neck and head were still attached. But, although it floated face down, he knew from a vivid scar on the back of the neck and a conspicuous mole on the shoulder that what he was viewing was a bit of his own mortal remains. It was that discovery that had convinced him he was dead—certainly a discovery in no way shocking, since few on the *El Paso* had expected any other outcome since their harried flight from the battle of the Banda Sea began. Jockens, in common with many of his kind, was necessarily a fatalist. What was to be would be, and he accepted the present fact with a mental shrug. But dying properly while doing his job was one thing, and the disconcerting tranformation that followed it was another. Jockens most emphatically did not yearn to be a ghost and forevermore haunt the empty ocean over the spot where his ship had sunk.

Yet that was unmistakably what was about to happen. He was becoming aware of taking visible, if not tangible, shape. He now perceived that he was sitting astride that broken oar, clad in immaculate whites and wearing the ribbons of all his many badges and medals. It was a tenuous and nebulous body he was acquiring, to be sure, but yet a faithful copy of his old one. What disturbed him most was the fact that though he steadily became more and more solid to the eye, he could still see the pale shaft of the oar beneath him even though he had to stare down through his phantom abdomen to see the whole of it. And worse, the oar rose and fell as easily as if it bore no burden. On the heels of that discovery he observed a parallel phenomenon. As he himself grew in apparent solidity, the things he knew to be real grew fainter. The water which bathed his legs took on a misty, iridescent quality and he saw that it did not wet him at all. The fragment of real body paled to a blob of cloudy stuff and eventually disappeared as does a blown-out candle flame, and with it the slender apparition of the oar. In ghostland, it was beginning to be evident, things of the spirit wore the aspect of reality, while the concrete became illusions.

There was almost instant verification of that observation from all about. On every hand his

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shipmates were popping into visibility, swimming along in the faint and ethereal ocean. They seemed to have a common goal. He turned his eyes that way and saw what it was. The *El Paso,* too, had been reconstituted in the spirit, and was even then steaming slowly along, picking up its men. Jockens rolled over on his side and began swimming for it with steady, even strokes. He was a little disappointed to find that the art of levitation —which the silly ghost believers had always attributed to ghosts—was not his, but perhaps that would come later. Yet swimming in the fictitious ocean served quite well, and he shortly found himself grasping at the lower rung of a Jacob's ladder someone had lowered over the side.

Harkey, the radio gunner, gave him a hand as he crawled over the bead molding and onto the quarterdeck.

"Hi, spook," he greeted, grinning from ear to ear. "How do you like it?"

"Don't rub it in," growled Jockens. It was only last night in that former world that Jockens had completely demolished every argument his superstitious messmate had advanced in favor of a sort of in-between state of after life. But under the present circumstances nothing occurred to him to say.

Jockens looked about the decks in astonishment. Things were as trim and shipshape as the day they had been commissioned, except that the spud

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locker, empty for a week, now bulged with spuds, and more spud crates were stacked on the deck beside it. So all the spuds they had eaten had come back as well! And in a moment similar discoveries were being made elsewhere in the ship. The gunner said his magazines were stuffed to capacity with powder and shell. The engineer reported full bunkers and replenished lubricating oil drums.

"Muster the crew," ordered the skipper, who had been taking the situation in without comment.

There were only five absentees—sea-lawyers all and chronic gripers, men whose heart had never been in the war.

"The first rule of ghosthood, it appears," remarked the commander ironically, "is that consciously or subconsciously, you who want very badly to carry on, do. I commend all present for that."

Just then there was a surprising diversion. A youthful seaman—the ship's inveterate cut-up—had stolen out of ranks and was clambering up the ladder to the maintop. He stopped a yard short of the pinnacle and shouted to those below.

"Hey, we're immortal now. Watch what we can get away with!"

With that he let go both hands and dived straight for the deck below. There was the gasp conditioned by long habit. Then the hurtling body struck the steel carapace of a gun housing with a sickening thud, only to slide off onto the deck where it lay motionless, a broken thing. It was all too clear that the neck and arms were broken and that the body was a corpse. Men ran up, but at once were forced to stand back in an awed semicircle. For a flicker of green flame played over the crumpled figure a moment; there was a quick blaze and then the body was no more. There was simply nothing there!

"Hm-m-m," murmured the surgeon, who had been the first to arrive. "Add Rule 2. A ghost can be killed, if ghostly means are employed. You men had better watch your step."

A hundred pairs of eyes were turned speculatively on the chaplain, but that officer did not see fit to speak. Perhaps the gnawing thought in his own mind as well as that of his silent questioners was, "After the first stage of ghosthood, what? And how many stages? And—"

The general alarm was ringing, and the men broke from their spell and dashed for their battle stations. Very, very faint, but plainly recognizable, the Jap battlewagon and two of its attendant cruisers were approaching. No doubt they wanted to cruise through the floating wreckage in expectation of picking up a prisoner or so, or other information. On the *El Paso* ranges were being taken and ammunition brought up. Battle orders rang out—the big fellow was to be the target.

"Commence firing!"

The cruiser heeled to the recoil of her broadside, and the control officers watched eagerly for the behavior of their salvo. What they saw was disappointing. The shells must have gone squarely through the oncoming ship, for mountains of white water sprang up just beyond. But it was as if the projectiles had merely passed through a wall of mist. The battleship did not notice. It came steadily on, and the phantoms on board the *El Paso* saw that its turrets had been secured. As far as it was concerned, the battle was over. There was only empty sea on which bits of debris floated.

The battleship came on, slowed, then passed squarely through the flimsy illusion that stood for the sunken cruiser. It was evident that neither could feel the other or have any material effect, and it was equally evident that while the ghosts could see the living Japs faintly, the Japs could not see them at all.

Chief Bos'n Jockens watched the show from his station on the fo'c's'le, and the more he saw the greater did his disgust with his new status grow. It was all very well to be reconstituted in what seemed to be flesh and on a convincing phantom of a ship that was well-fueled, well-armed and well-provisioned. But where did it get them?

There had been a discouraging silence from the bridge ever since that one futile salvo had fallen. The commander had checked fire and waited. Now he was watching the passing victors. Suddenly he sighted something, and a fresh clamor of orders rang out.

"On the machine guns, there! Look aft on that second Jap cruiser—see those solid-looking figures. Let 'em have it!"

The second cruiser was one they had exchanged a few shots with and scored a hit or so before the arrival of the heavy stuff. On the after deck a broadside gun had been dismounted, but not destroyed, as its filmy haziness attested. Alongside it, however, were ranged a score of very material-appearing Japs. The conclusion was inevitable—they must be the ghosts of the dead gun crew.

The machine guns chattered, the smoky tracers leading fairly to their mark. The Japs, still bewildered at the new state of existence which they did not understand, began disappearing by twos and threes in little puffs of dazzling green fire. A wild cheer went up from the decks of the erstwhile *El Paso*. Not a single watcher but comprehended the significance of what was being revealed. They could not kill living Japs, but they could send dead ones another leg on the road to Hell!

The same thought had swept the bridge, for as the last of the enemy gun crew flickered out into the unknown second stage of the hereafter, the rudder had been put hard over and the engine telegraphs moved to "Flank Speed." The sailors

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of the *El Paso* knew without waiting for the orders that would follow what to do. They broke out torpedoes and loaded their tubes. Fresh charges rang home to their seats in the guns. Twenty miles away—over the horizon—there must be the shades of the four Jap destroyers they had just sunk when the battleship came up and made them run for it.

It was less than an hour before they picked them up. The destroyers were heading dismally for their homeland, indicating that the Japanese psychology did not comprehend the possibilities or responsibilities of ghosthood.

"Ha!" snorted Jockens, seeing their state of unreadiness. "Now it's our turn to do a sneak attack."

The attack went home. The second version of the morning's battle was short, and to the attackers doubly sweet. They watched with satisfaction as the phantom foes blew up and sank in quick succession. Five miles farther on they came upon a windfall—a bomber they must have shot down and not known about. It still rested on the waves and its crew was trying to make a take-off. A few bursts of ack-ack disposed of it, leaving once more an empty ocean.

"Now what?" asked the navigator.

"Back to the Macassar Straits and Bali," snapped the captain. "I am not exactly sure what we gain by this, but it's fun—and it smells like progress."

The ship straightened out on a southerly course, but not for long. Late in the day came the lookout's cry, "Sail-ho!" Three pairs of binoculars and a long glass came to bear on the object. It was plainly visible, though miles away; and therefore clearly another phantom. But it was no gray-hulled warship of any modern navy. Beautiful in the low slanting rays of the setting sun, she flaunted many square yards of snowy canvas, complete with studding sails, top royals and skysails. The commander rang down for more blowers on. He wanted to reach the distant clipper before the coming night blotted her out.

The cruiser made it, just at the edge of dusk, and as her screws churned the water astern to rid her of her way, it could also be seen that the clipper flew the Stars and Stripes, though of a design strange to modern eyes. It bore only half the number of stars displayed on the ensign at the *El Paso's* gaff. The friendly phantom ship was obviously a Yankee of the old China trade, fully a century old, and the smart seamanship with which she backed her sails and got the quarter-boat away was further evidence of it. A few seconds later the boat was being rowed with swift, sure strokes toward the cruiser. A tall, gaunt man whose face was framed by whiskers, but whose chin and upper lip were clean shaven, sat in the stern sheets, tending the tiller.

"Boat ahoy!" hailed the cruiser.

"The *Bethesda*, one hundred and two years and five months out of Boston," came the response, clear but husky, from a voice that must have had far more than that number of years of experience in bellowing orders through a speaking trumpet into the teeth of a gale. "Ezra Sitwell, master. We want gunpowder, rum and vittles, if we can git 'em."

"Come alongside," replied the voice from the cruiser, and a moment later was giving orders for rigging cargo lights and dropping a ladder over the side. It was Jockens who attended personally to the last item and who was present when the grizzled skipper of a century ago climbed aboard.

Captain Sitwell solemnly saluted; then shook hands all around.

"Howdy, cappen," he said. "Glad to fall in with you. Newcomer to these parts, eh? We heard tell there was a new war on, and that soon we'd be having plenty of company. It gits mighty dull hereabouts some years, what with nothing but typhoons to depend on for recruits and provisions. 'Twas a hundred years ago come September that we wuz caught the same way—typhoon took our sticks out and threw us up on the shore of Shikoku. Fight we tried to, but we were half drowned, and the murdering heathen beachcombers came at us with their wicked knives. I've haunted their coast ever since, picking up fishing boats mostly. But black powder and honest round shot are hard to come by these days, and lately we've had to depend on our cutlasses and sheath knives."

"We'll try to help," said the commander of the *El Paso*. Yet he made no move to order up the supplies asked for, partly because he had little of either and partly because he wanted to know more of this ghostly existence that had fallen to their lot. "Tell me," he asked, "don't ghosts ever die?"

"Nope. Only by violence, and that from ghosts or ghostly stuff."

Captain Sitwell chuckled. "The sea can't hurt us, because it ain't real. Neither are the rocks and shoals—"

"But old age, disease—"

Sitwell shook his head. "Ghosts stay the same age. 'Bout disease—four-five years ago I fell in with a foundered yacht—had a modern doctor on board—had plenty of whiskey on board—we talked all night. He told me about microbes and why they don't bother us. Ornery critters they were, he said, too little and ornery to have souls. So they don't bother us."

The commander noted the inquiring look that followed the simple explanation, and knew he must do something about the request at hand.

"What's your armament?"

"Carronades, muskets and pistols."

The commander shook his head. He had a few hundred pounds of black powder for his saluting

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battery, but no other ammunition suitable for ancient ordnance. Nor did he have any rum on board. He offered a dozen modern rifles and four one-pounder boat guns with ammunition to match, but the skipper of the sailing ship looked dubious.

"Nope," he said, "I've tried those newfangled things before. We'd best stick to cutlasses and knives, I reckon."

"I believe we can fix him up, commander," volunteered Jockens.

A moment later men were scouring the storerooms of the ship. Presently they were coming up, bringing the results of their search. All the black powder there was, two kegs of rivets and two more of assorted nuts—which would be useful for grape shot for Sitwell's carronades. There was some other miscellaneous scrap iron, a few sheets of gasket lead, and eight bags of sugar. The *Bethesda,* being manned by the old-fashioned, self-sufficient breed of sailors, could undoubtedly cast her own bullets and make her own rum. To that store of necessities, the cruiser added onions, spuds and eggs, things not easily come by among the salvage of the Eastern Seas.

"Many thanks, cappen," said Sitwell, beaming. "I'll do all right now. By the way, a couple of weeks ago I spoke a brother clipper down by Tai Wan. He says a lot of you fellows have shown up in the South China Sea and around Java. Says they made a big killing and have cleaned out everything. Last he saw of them, they were going on to India for fresh pickings there. Says they even hunted down a cruiser that's been plaguing us old fellows for twenty years or more—a German ship called the *Emden.* I sure hated that fellow, but all I could ever do was run from him. He wasn't so fast lately, 'cause he was a coal-burner and coal's getting almost as scarce as black powder."

Captain Sitwell said no more. Nor did the frowning captain of the *El Paso.* That last news was not too encouraging. If the sunken Asiatic Fleet had gotten on the job as quickly as they seemed to have, there was nothing left for his own ship to do. The months ahead looked dreary.

"In your experience, Captain Sitwell," he asked, "is it possible to communicate with the living?"

The *Bethesda's* skipper walked to the lee rail and relieved his cheek of an immense load of tobacco juice.

"Wa-al," he drawled, "yes. And no. There's mediums, but mighty few of 'em are any good. You can only send a word or two and they mostly get those mixed up. What they send back don't hardly ever make sense. Anyhow, living folks can't help us much."

"Maybe not," admitted the commander, but he cast a thoughtful eye toward Jockens, just the same. The last of the supplies had been sent down into the *Bethesda's* boat and Jockens was back, watchful and drinking in what was said.

Captain Sitwell repeated his thanks and made his formal farewells, adding as an afterthought:

"They do tell me this newfangled thing you call radio will do it. The messages you send, the living folks call static; but if you could find an operator that was a medium, too, you might get somewhere."

Jockens cocked his head to one side and delivered himself of a solemn wink. Then he disappeared below. Presently he emerged with Harkey, and the pair hurried away to the radio shack. In the meantime the boat had shoved off, the *El Paso* was picking up speed along her resumed course, and the faint running lights of the clipper were dropping fast astern. High up between the masts, an antennae set began crackling out static. Half an hour later Jockens stole softly out of the room and mounted to the bridge.

"Sir," he said, addressing his skipper, "Harkey and me's found the answer. He was always telling me about a niece of his he claims is psychic. I always thought that was so much hogwash, but lately I've been thinking maybe it's not. Anyway, she's in Communications at Honolulu. Harkey just got a message through and she managed to dope it out. We told her we're sunk, and where and how, and what a hole we're in for something to do next. She came back in plain English and said, 'I hear you perfectly and understand. The admiral's here and is interested. He wants to know what can we do for you?' "

The commander sighed. What, indeed, could the living do for the dead?

"Nice try, Jockens," said the skipper, "but I can't think of what to say to him. Can you?"

"Sure, sir." Nobody could see Jockens' wide grin in the dark, but it was there, as big and persistent as a Cheshire cat's. He was about to do some plagiarizing, but under certain conditions and with certain famous phrases, plagiarism becomes a virtue.

"Well?" snapped the commander, his nerves on edge.

"Why, sir, we could turn around and go scouting for live ones. They can't see us, but we can see them. Then we could send word to the admiral where they are, how many, and how they're heading—"

"Swell," answered the skipper, suddenly cheered. The *El Paso* sunk could still partly do her job in the world they had left, though her own guns and tubes would be useless. "Swell," he repeated, "but it doesn't answer the admiral's question. He wants to know what he can do for *us.*"

Jockens chuckled.

"Send us more Japs!"

THE END.

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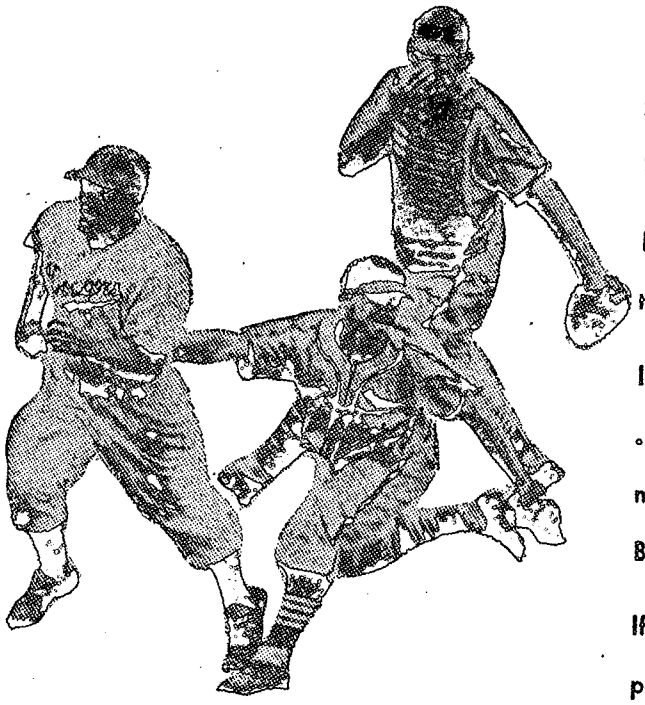

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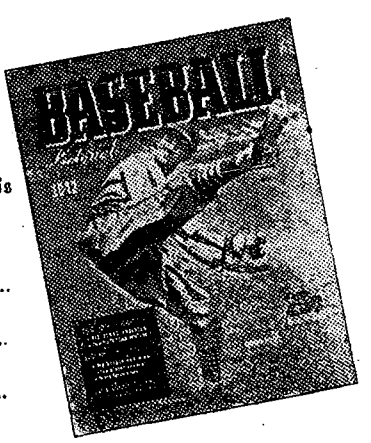

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THE WISDOM OF THE EAST

By L. Sprague de Camp

A tale of mighty—if somewhat whacky—powers and knowledge of great depth—even if it is, of necessity, useless.

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

Alan Bennett took a quick look up and down Fifty-ninth Street to make sure that no acquaintance was in sight, and ducked into the elderly building.

Inside the doors was a vestibule before you started up the creaking steps. Around the vestibule were glass frames. One of these held samples of a commercial photographer's art. Another contained a brown-tinted photograph of a dark-skinned man with a prominent nose and large liquid black eyes. Under the photograph were the words "Shri Motilal Bhulojna. Third Floor."

As Bennett stood with his back to the big glass doors, absorbing this information, a voice at his elbow said: "You are Mr. Bennett, are you not?"

Bennett spun and faced Shri Motilal Bhulojna himself, in a white suit.

"Why . . . uh . . . yes," said Bennett.

"A commercial artist?"

"Yes." Bennett wondered how the fellow knew that. Of course, it is not too difficult to discover a man's occupation if you want to go to the trouble.

The Yogi was not quite as tall and thin as Bennett. He looked just about Bennett's age, which was thirty-five, though Bennett looked older than that because his hair had begun to gray.

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"I stepped out for a minute," continued Shri Motilal. "Will you come up? I am about to give my introductory talk." He trotted up the creaking stairs, Bennett following with a slight frown of perplexity.

Halfway up, Alan Bennett figured out what was wrong. The big glass doors opened inward. He had been standing with his back to them. To enter by those doors, it would have been necessary to push him, Bennett, out of the way. There were no other doors opening off the ground-floor vestibule.

Bennett, being an artist, was not too long on logic. But he could see that either (a) things were not what they seemed, or (b) Shri Motilal Bhulojna had either come down from the ceiling or popped out of a trapdoor like the Devil in "Faust," or had wafted through the solid matter inclosing the vestibule.

He quickened his step. Before, he had been on the verge of calling off his visit to the alleged Yogi. Now nothing short of superior force would have kept him away.

When they reached the third floor, Shri Motilal opened a door in the conventional manner and waved Bennett through. He said: "Will you sit there, please?"

Bennett saw a number of chairs at one side of the room. Four of these were occupied, by one small, bleary old man and three women: one matron built on battleship lines, one middle-aged desiccated virgin, and one blond square-jawed girl, good-looking but verging on spinsterhood.

Shri Motilal Bhulojna reappeared. He still wore his white suit, but had changed his shoes for slippers and covered his blue-black hair with a turban.

He began his lecture without hesitation, using the British pronunciation with a slight but pervasive nasal accent. "My friends, before you begin a coursss of instruction in the discipline of Yoga, it will be desirable to clear up any misconceptions that your Western minds may be harboring.

"To begin with, it is a great mistake to suppose that the mere fact of Eastern origin is any guarantee of mysteriousss or occult powers. India has developed her own schools of materialist philosophy. For instansss, the Vaiseshika school anticipated many of your Western doctrines of atomic physicsss. And it is a notoriousss fact that India has produced her share of charlatans and fakers.

"I will not make exaggerated claims for the benefitsss that you will derive from the discipline of Yoga. As one of your own prophetsss remarked, many are called but few are chosen. Not all of you are equipped in thisss incarnation to achieve the state of superconsciousnesss known as *samadhi*, which is the goal of our philosophy. But as you persevere you will achieve, and as you achieve you will be rewarded.

"The first branch of Yoga we shall take up is the Hatha, or physical, Yoga, for you must obviously learn to control your bodies before you can dispensss with them. Later we shall work up to the Jnara or intellectual Yoga—"

Alan Bennett found that the singsong cadence of the voice was putting him to sleep. He woke up with a jerk. Shri Motilal Bhulojna noticed and looked severe. Bennett pulled himself together in time to absorb the instructions for the first two steps.

One step was abstinence. Bennett did not think he would miss the liquor much, since he was a very sparing drinker. The meatless diet did not appeal, but he supposed he could put up with it for a while anyway. The ban on smoking promised to be a real hardship.

The other step was a preliminary bout of *dharana* or fixed attention. The five aspirants were simply to sit absolutely still for one hour. Having issued that instruction, Shri Motilal kicked off his slippers, hitched up his white pants, sat down on the floor, and settled himself in the lotus posture with each foot resting on the opposite thigh. Then to all appearances he became a brown-skinned statue.

At the end of ten minutes, Alan Bennett developed an itch on his nose, then an itch in his left foot, then an itch on his right shoulder blade. The itches spread until Alan Bennett was one vast itch.

At twenty-five minutes the little bleary man coughed loudly, got up, and walked out muttering, "Damn foolishness." Bennett sympathized with him, but did not intend to leave until he had settled the question of how a man can go through a glass door without opening it. The incident took Bennett's mind off his itches for a while, though they soon returned.

When they seemed utterly intolerable, Shri Motilal uncoiled himself, got up, and said: "That will be all, friends. I trust I shall see you tomorrow night at the same time. Good night."

Bennett had his mouth half open to ask about the door, but he lacked the brass to force the question on the Yogi in the face of such a plain implication to depart.

Bennett had trouble with his pictures the next day. He blamed it on the landlady's noise, on the humidity, on the poorness of the light coming through the skylights of his studio—it was a summer-thunder-showery day—and finally on the real cause, which was his curiosity about the incident of the glass doors.

He arrived at Bhulojna's nearly half an hour early, which would have sounded fantastic to those who knew Alan Bennett's habits. He was the first

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to appear. Bhulojna told him to make himself comfortable, and floated off into some inner sanctum.

Then the blonde arrived. She said: "Hello. I'm Pauline Edge. Your name's Bennett, isn't it?"

Bennett admitted with some reluctance that it was.

The girl continued: "Mother's running some British-aid thingummy tonight, but she told me to come and remember everything Mr. Bhulojna said." They talked about the weather, discovered that they had a couple of acquaintances in common, and in a few minutes were old friends.

Bennett said: "What do you do, Pauline?"

"Me? I just puppy-dog mother."

"Is that your idea of fun?"

"Lord, no. But I'm not fitted to do anything else. We're members of the New Poor, you know. Have been for ten years. I'm not pretty enough for modeling. I'd have at least learned to run a typewriter, but mother wouldn't have it, and since she has what little money there is, here I am. That's what comes of being raised to be a debutante, damn it!"

"How'd you happen in here?"

"Some more of mother's ideas. Now that she's paid for the course, at least one of us will have to go through with it. How about you?"

"Me?" said Bennett. "Oh, I don't know. I was getting bored with my friends, and I thought I ought to have some interests besides my pictures. So I thought I'd see what there was to this wisdom-of-the-East idea."

"Here comes the Master now," said Pauline.

Shri Motilal Bhulojna drifted in. "Good evening, friends," he said, blandly unconcerned with the shrinkage in his audience. "Tonight I give you some more of the ideological background of Yoga, so that you shall understand that it is not hocusss-pocusss. We can be more informal now that the materialistsss have fallen by the wayside, as they always do.

"The postures of Hatha-Yoga, known as *asana*, are the means of raising the transcendental elements in your personalities to their rightful position of control over the material elementsss. By ascending the triad of *dharana, dhyana* and *samadhi*, you not only gain command of your own bodies—including the so-called 'involuntary' functions—but over the forces of nature, and eventually achieve unity with the universal spirit—"

At this point Bennett began to lose the thread of the argument. He could not decide whether he was stupid not to understand all these metaphysical terms, or whether Bhulojna was putting something over on him.

He wished most avidly for a smoke. He interrupted the flow of metaphysics to ask: "Excuse me, but how long do I have to give up these things—smoking and drinking and such?"

Shri Motilal looked at him pityingly. "These things are merely the first items on the list of things you will give up."

"Huh? You mean there's more?"

"That is so. Of course, since neither of you is married, it is unnecessary for me even to mention one of the subjects."

Pauline Edge here gave a gurgle of suppressed laughter, whereat the Yogi looked very stern indeed. "I see nothing humorousss in such a matter, Misss Edge. You do not appear to realize the sacrifice I am making by offering myself as your *guru*. To live in thisss den of materialism; to degrade myself by accepting *money*— But then, how could you? You cannot know how you handicap me in my mastery of the highest grade of Yoga—the Yoga of Patanjali, the Yoga of inaction—for you have never experienced it. The fault is mine. I should have told you that as you advansss in your studies, you will miss these material pleasures lesss and lesss. If you attain *samadhi*, your attitude toward material things will be one of indifference or even disgust."

Bennett asked: "What's the purpose of that?"

"Ah, that is the whole point. It is hard to explain the unexplainable, but I will try. Buddhism, which is in a sensss a heretical offshoot of Yoga, expresses it thusss: the five aggregates of grasping are pain. The cause of pain is the craving that leads to rebirth. The cessation of pain depends on the cessation of craving, which is attained by the disintegration of the aggregates that compose the personality. Our doctrine is slightly different from that, but it gives you an idea—" And Shri Motilal was off again, his fingers making delicate patterns in the air and his eyes fixed on something far away.

"Now," he said, "let us try the lotus posture. It would be unwise for you to assume it more than fifteen minutes of material time on the first trial. Remove your shoes."

Pauline had no great difficulty in getting into the position. Bennett accomplished it only after much painful grunting and cracking of joints. Bhulojna said: "No, do not place your right hand on your knee. That is the heretical Buddhist variant." And he floated off.

After a few minutes of silence, a grunt came from Alan Bennett. Then an indescribable sound that, if he had not been trying to maintain a meditative silence, would have been, "For Heaven's sake get me out of this!"

He made a few movements to try to escape from the posture, but they did no good. He was stuck. He felt like a rat in a trap, and the fact that the trap was composed of his own members only made the sensation the more gruesome. He tugged and pushed at his feet, but that only aggravated the pain.

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Pauline looked at him, then cried in alarm: "Help! Mr. Bhulojna!"

The Yogi drifted through the solid wall of the room. While Bennett forgot his agony and Pauline gawped, Shri Motilal touched a couple of Bennett's muscles. Bennett's legs came out of their contortion.

Bennett said: "How . . . how did you do that?"

"How did I— Ah, you mean my entransss. I told you that we attain to control over the forces of nature."

"Is that how you came through the door last night?"

"Yesss. I fear I grow carelesss. You have cost me a severe setback, for the essence of these powers is that one shall be too indifferent to the material world to use them. Can you rise?"

Bennett tried. The other two finally got him to his feet, but he could not stand anywhere near straight.

Pauline supported Alan Bennett down the stairs and out. She asked him anxiously: "How are you feeling, Alan?"

"I think my back's busted," replied Bennett.

"Oh, you poor boy! You need someone to take care of you!"

"Thanks," said Bennett, "but right now I need a drink more."

"Swell idea. But—how about Mr. Bhulojna's rules of abstinence?"

"To hell with Mr. Bhulojna."

"Still, Alan, I think he's really got something there, with his oozing through walls."

"Maybe he has. But he can keep it as far as I'm concerned. I'm an artist, not a committee for psychical research. Now how about that drink?"

By the following evening, Bennett found himself able to walk almost normally. Pauline telephoned him: "Alan, are you still interested in

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the wisdom of the East?"

"*No!* Well, maybe I am a little, but not to the extent of tying myself in hard knots for it. Why, Polly?"

"I think I've found one who won't tie you in knots."

"Found one what? Another Yogi?"

"Not exactly. This one calls himself a Vedantist philosopher. Name's Shri Ramanuja Bhamkh. He guarantees to give you all the Eastern wisdom you want without contortions or breathing exercises. Want to try him out?"

Bennett did.

Shri Ramanuja Bhamkh hung out on East Fifty-ninth Street only a couple of blocks from Shri Motilal Bhulojna's place. Shri Ramanuja Bhamkh himself was a more colorful person than the Yogi—tall and powerfully built, with a long gray beard and bushy eyebrows. His audience was much the same sort of crowd that Bennett had found at Bhulojna's the first time, only bigger.

Bennett had been late, in accordance with his usual habits. He arrived when Bhamkh was saying: "—wherefore the self is not the unity of the evergrowing and changing mental experiences. The self in dreamless sleep cannot satisfy our need, since it is empty of all content and is a bare abstraction. The true self is the universal consciousnesss existing both in and for itself. The three states of the soul—waking, dreaming and sleeping—are included in a fourth—*turiya—which* is intuitional consciousnesss, where there is no knowledge of objectsss internal or external. It is the unchanged and persistent identity which continues in the midst of all change—"

Bennett did not understand this, but his artist's sense could appreciate the fine picture that Shri Ramanuja made with his turban and beard and sweeping arms.

"—which brings us the doctrine of *Maya*, the world-illusion. Every object tends to passs away from itself to something elsss. The categories of time, space and cause which bind experience are self-contradictory. Our knowledge of the world is inconsistent—"

"Wonder if I could get him to pose for me," thought Bennett. "They wanted a rajah for that blended-rye ad—"

After it was all over, Bennett said to his friend: "I didn't quite get it all, I'm afraid."

"Neither did I," replied Pauline. "But isn't he picturesque? I think I'll go to the rest of the lectures in this course; they're cheap enough."

She went, and Bennett, whose own girl friends had all married or moved away a couple of years previously, went, too. By the third lecture he was getting restless.

When the audience was breaking up after Bennett's third lecture, and the usual knot was plying Shri Ramanuja with questions, of honest puzzlement or spurious erudition as the case might be, Bennett said to Pauline in a low voice: "Polly, all I get is words, words and more words. Don't you think we could get more wisdom of the East for our money out of somebody else?"

Pauline looked uncomfortable. Before she answered, Shri Ramanuja Bhamkh was upon them. "My friends!" he said heartily. "I have had my spiritual eye on you for some time." Then, in a much lower voice: "How would you like to join our Inner Circle?"

"Is there one?" asked Bennett.

"Yesss, surely. One does not expose the tender minds of children like these to the ancient wisdom without preparation."

Bennett queried: "Does that mean giving up all the material pleasures?"

"No, no, no silly asceticism. We merely penetrate to the reality that underlies the world-illusion. Come, I beg of you."

They went.

There were three other members of the Inner Circle. All, to Bennett's surprise, were good-looking girls.

The room was dark and high-ceilinged. At the far end was a little statue of something with a lot of arms, illuminated by a concealed red light.

Shri Ramanuja had changed to a long gown. He said solemnly: "In thisss, the five thousand and forty-third year of the Kali Yoga, we have gathered in the name of Ardha-narissa, to symbolize the union of the *Maya* or cosmic illusion with the *Prakriti* or plastic matter, and thereby to penetrate to the primary source of mundane things." Here followed several metaphysical sentences that Bennett understood not at all. He felt vaguely uneasy.

Bhamkh continued: "The first *mantra* or word of power that we shall learn this evening is ---." At the end of this sentence Bhamkh rounded his lips as if he were saying "oh," but no sound came forth.

"Beg pardon?" said Bennett

Bhamkh smiled. "I forgot that you are a little behind the rest of us. Know that *mantras*, which the foolish Yogis misuse as a mere hypnotic device, are in reality ideal, inaudible sounds constituting one aspect of the universe. When written they form a universal terminology. Do you speak French?"

"A . . . a little," said Bennett, flustered.

"Know, then, that the *mantra* ---, if sounded, would be a vowel like that in the French word *bon* —an *onh* sound. It is one of the most powerful

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mantras, representing as it does the triple constitution of the cosmosss. The component partsss, ah, oo, mm, represent respectively the Absolute, the Relative and the relation between them. Now, say ---."

"---," mouthed Bennett.

Shri Ramanuja smiled. "With a little practisss you will be perfect. These are the defensive *mantras;* only to advanced studentsss do I reveal the offensive ones. The next word of power is ----------."

"Huh?" said Bennett.

"----------," Bhamkh politely did not say. "It is spelled A-v-e-l-o-k-i-t-e-s-h-v-a-r-a and *if* it were pronounced it would be Avelokiteshvara. Say ----------"

"----------" repeated the students.

Bhamkh explained: "The *mantra* ---------- assures that, should you meet with a fatal accident in the practisss of our brotherhood, you will be reborn at one of the ten points of space."

He continued to instruct his class in ideal, inaudible sounds. Bennett found it harder and harder to keep his faculties with him. He was not exactly sleepy, but his mind seemed bent on wrapping itself into a fuzzy trancelike state.

Bennett tried to concentrate on Bhamkh's instructions, but that only made it worse. He tried the multiplication table, but that did no good. He was not alarmed; merely curious and a little peeved, as he was when he found himself to have drunk beyond his modest capacity, that his mind would no longer behave as he wished it to.

The thought drifted through his mind again: what a swell picture the old guy would make! At once the mists cleared a little. Bennett, with the still-conscious part of his mind, felt relief. If it was as easy to escape as that, there was nothing to worry about. He let himself slip a little further into the trance again. He noted with lack of much interest that the four girls were all leaning forward with glassy eyes.

Shri Ramanuja Bhamkh straightened up. "Enough instruction," he said. "We are now ready for the climaxsss of our meeting; the consummation of our contact with the reality of which the world-illusion is but the shadow: the worship of the female creative principle!"

That brought the tiny still-conscious fragment of Bennett's mind up standing. Whatever worship of the female creative principle was, Alan Bennett did not like the sound of it.

But it was so hard to think, and his body refused utterly to obey the feeble commands of that two percent of a mind—

Bhamkh looked the audience over, ending with Pauline Edge. "You," he breathed, "as the newest member of our circle, will officiate this time!"

Bennett frantically turned on his knowledge of art. The lighting and composition would make a swell magazine cover—

Slowly his mind came awake, feeling for all the world like an arm to which the circulation is returning after having been cut off.

Bennett pushed himself out of his chair, inch by inch. He croaked "J-j-just a m-m-minute—"

Shri Ramanuja whirled. "What isss thisss? You interrupt the Massster?" He took two steps forward and did not say the *mantra* "----- ----- --!"

Bennett reeled backward as from a blow. Bhamkh followed.

"-------!"

Bennett felt the floor leave his feet.

"--- ----- -- --------!" A great wind whipped at Bennett's bony form. He slid toward the door, faster and faster, down the stairs, and through the glass doors at the entrance to the building. He went through the glass, not by any mystical process, but with a loud crash and tinkle.

He picked himself up. There was a small cut on his wrist. A couple of pedestrians were looking at him. He lunged back at the doorway. As soon as he stepped inside it that wind—which did not seem to blow anything but him about—caught him, and the floor became slippery under his feet.

He gave up that attack. You needed fire to fight the Devil. And the best fire merchant lived only two blocks away.

Shri Motilal Bhulojna unwound himself and looked up at the panting Bennett when the latter burst in without knocking. The Yogi said with the faintest hint of querulousness: "You have interrupted my concentration. Why?"

Bennett told his story.

"Ah, well," said Bhulojna. "I could have told you Bhamkh was a secret Tantrist, and a left-hand one at that. If you had persevered in your study of Yoga to the attainment of even a fraction of my powers, you would have been able to deal with him."

"Can you?" said Bennett.

"Yesss. That is, I could have up to last week."

"You mean you've forgotten how?" cried Bennett.

"Not at all. It is merely that I have mastered the Yoga of Patanjali, the great Yoga of inaction. I shall return to India and devote myself to the highest form of my philosophy, the doing of nothing."

"But . . . but—you don't want this guy Bhamkh to . . . uh . . . do whatever he's going to do?"

"I do not *want* anything. The world and all that is in it are utterly unimportant to me."

Bennett danced with frantic anxiety. "But . . . but—"

Bhulojna said thoughtfully: "There is one

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thing I can do. I will not thwart this Tantrist personally, as that would involve action on my part. But I will summon a fellow adept, who may be able to help you, heretical Mahayanian though he be."

Bhulojna closed his eyes. He remained absolutely still, not even breathing, for one minute while Bennett fidgeted.

There was glow at one side of the room. Through the wall glided a small yellow man in an extremely dirty yellow robe. He was sitting on nothing in the lotus posture.

Bhulojna said in a bored, faraway voice: "This, Alan Bennett, is the Pan-chen-rin-po-cho, sometimes called the Tashi Lama. He already knows your story. He will help you."

"Oh, will I?" squeaked the little yellow man. "All the way from Tashilhunpo to rescue the negligible victim of an unimportant Tantrist? It shows less than your usual good sense, Shri Motilal. Anyway, I am not sure that my principles will let me."

"Why?" yelled Bennett.

"It might result in the loss of the Tantrist's life. And I am not permitted to take life under any circumstances. For instance—" He extended a plump wrist. Bennett took a good look at it; then almost fell backward in his haste to put yards between the Tashi Lama and himself. He gagged.

"You see?" said the Lama. "I must not kill one of my little six-legged friends, or even deprive it of a warm and comfortable home. So to take the life of a Tantrist would be out of the question."

Bennett asked: "Couldn't you teach me what to do? Then the blame would be mine."

"No. It would still be mine, though at second remove."

Bennett had a horrible inspiration. He shot out a skinny arm; his fingers snatched at the Lama's skin where the arthropod life clustered.

"Now," he grated, "I've got four or five of your little six-legged friends between my thumb and forefinger—"

"Murderer!" screamed the Lama. "Return my friends at once!"

"Not until I get the dope from you on how to fix Bhamkh. If you won't do it, I'll squeeze and squash—"

"All right, all right!" panted the Tashi Lama. "I will do it! To sacrifice one life to save five will not, I hope, exclude me from the ranks of the Bodhisattvas."

Bhulojna said: "You may return the Pan-chen-rin-po-cho's guests, Alan Bennett. What he says he will do, he will do."

That seemed plausible in view of the Lama's fantastic scrupulousness about killing. And Bennett had no pillbox to keep the Lama's friends in. He obeyed.

When the transfer had been effected, the Tashi Lama gave the impatient Bennett several *mantras*. Bennett dashed out of the building without amenities.

Bennett bounded through the shattered door of the building that housed Shri Ramanuja Bhamkh. The wind caught at him and held him.

"-------!" Bennett did not say. The wind ceased so suddenly that he almost fell forward.

He bounded up the stairs. When the stairs turned slippery, Bennett did not say, "----- -----!" When his weight disappeared, another *mantra* brought it back again.

Almost immediately a new sound penetrated to Bennett's ears. Something, evidently in Bhamkh's studio, was going *tweedle tweedle twee* with an air of intense self-importance. Bhamkh seemed to have run out of, or given up on, long-range *mantras;* the entrance to the Inner Circle neither writhed, bit, slipped nor displayed undue originality. It opened.

Shri Ramanuja Bhamkh was doing the *tweedle-tweeing*. He was attired as Krishna, engaged in a loose-kneed, bowlegged dance, and breathing hard. One of the excessive number of arms with which he appeared to be equipped was occupied in *tweedling*. On the floor before him, Pauline Edge sat cross-legged with her arms up. Back of her sat the other three girls in a similar posture. They were all singing a hymn that was not less beautiful for the fact that it was completely inaudible.

Bennett dashed across the room and pointed at Shri Ramanuja. "------!"

The Tantrist reeled from the attack, but came back with one of his own: "--- --- ---!"

"----- --- -- ---- -!" retorted Bennett.

"-----!"

"---- ----- ------ ---!"

"-!"

Shri Ramanuja abandoned the duel of *mantras* and tried another form of hostilities. Before Bennett's eyes he grew and changed into a towering black figure with ten arms. Each arm bore a lethal weapon. He advanced on Bennett.

But when the Tantrist changed form, the four girls at once came out of their trances. They looked at each other and then at the thing that Shri Ramanuja had become. One of them scrambled to her feet and ran out the door; one sat where she was and shrieked; one tried to bury her face in the floor boards.

Pauline Edge showed a better grasp of the situation. She picked up one of the empty chairs, climbed on another chair, and with the first chair she hit the ten-armed nightmare over its loathsome head.

The chair splintered and the thing staggered.

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Bennett, who had with what he thought was his last breath been damning the Tashi Lama for not foreseeing this, jumped forward and wrenched a spear from one of the ten black hands. He reversed the weapon and jabbed; felt the point go in.

Then he was chasing the thing downstairs and out into Fifty-ninth Street. It was very late and few people were abroad. The nearest person was a citizen named Pascarella, whose trade was the robbery by force of arms of financial institutions. Mr. Pascarella, seeing ten feet of ten-armed Hindu demon bearing down on him, drew a pistol, fired once, and dropped dead of heart failure.

The thing also fell, kicked a little, and changed back into Shri Ramanuja Bhamkh. While the crowd brought out by the shot gathered around the corpses of the bank robber and the man in the beard and turban, Bennett and Pauline Edge slipped away. They found a doorway in which they stood and simply shivered for a few minutes.

When they found their voices, Bennett said: "I suppose we ought to go back to Bhulojna's and tell him what happened."

Pauline nodded.

They found the Yogi in a posture more intricate than they would have believed possible. He saw them, partially unwound himself, and said ungraciously: "Oh, it is you again. What is it?"

Bennett told him what had happened.

Shri Motilal mused: "Bhamkh's mistake was to resort to material means, whereas with purely transcendental ones he might at least have escaped with his life. He forgot that thisss bizarre form he assumed would have no greater intelligensss, courage, or strength of character than did the original man. He will pay for his error by being reincarnated as a tapeworm, no doubt."

Bennett asked: "Is the fellow from Tibet gone? I wanted to thank him."

"It does not matter. Such things are utterly unimportant to him, as they are to me. I leave for India immediately."

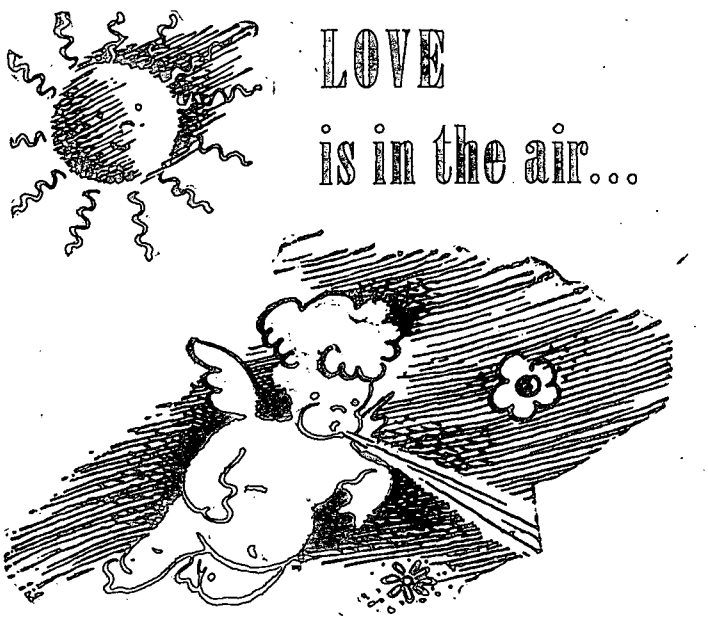
"Oh, so soon? Polly and I were just thinking . . . uh . . . we were a little hasty in running out on you. Would you consider giving us some more lessons?"

"No. I have advanced to the stage where my usefulnesss as a *guru* is ended, as is witnessed by my failure with you two. Anyway, I see that you are planning a set of materialistic interests inconsistent with progress in Yoga. You are going to ask thisss woman to marry you, are you not, when you get your courage up?"

Bennett reddened, then snapped: "Yes, I am."

"Disgusting. I go." Without further farewell, Shri Motilal Bhulojna, still in his half-contorted posture, rose from where he coiled and drifted through the wall. He was gone.

THE END.



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STEP INTO MY GARDEN

By Frank Belknap Long

It was a very curious sort of garden, and the things that grew there were attacked by a variety of pests of even more curious nature. But principally, the peculiarity was that the garden wasn't—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

Although Kendrick had walked home from the station with a golf bag slung across his back he looked and felt cool. It was a lovely June day, and up and down the neighborhood skewerwood trees were in full, luscious bloom. He had a feeling he might find this homecoming the best yet.

The garden would be blooming, and Anne—Anne would have a new hair-do. She was always surprising him by making little, adorable changes in herself.

He set his luggage down in the vestibule and fumbled in his pocket for his keys. In all the years he had known her she had never been the same woman twice. He was lucky to be married to a girl who knew how to rearrange the little intangibles which made a man feel that his home was an intimate part of himself.

Anne never failed to make changes in his absence, putting a new vase here, a floral innovation there, moving the piano a little, trimming down Scottie till he looked like a ludicrous old man, and even sprucing up his library by adding new titles, and dusting down the shelves.

Even in the winter months Anne made changes, so that when he returned from brief, frosty trips he'd find the logs in the fireplace crackling under a new and better updraft or a pair of fur-lined lounge slippers substituted for the leather ones he had left by his chair on his way out.

But now—now he felt in his bones that he was about to experience something which would make this particular homecoming unique. Spring was the season of changes, and he had been away three full weeks.

He was not disappointed. As soon as he threw open the front door a change came floating toward him which stopped him in his tracks.

It was an odor, a fragrance as of new-mown Paradise, gathered up in porous sacks and hung up in front of an electric fan which had wasted no time in wafting it around about.

For a moment Kendrick stood motionless, his nostrils quivering. Then he whipped out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. He no longer felt cool. The house was humid, damp, and the perfume seemed to collect on his face, stifling him. It was the sweetest fragrance he had ever inhaled, but also the most cloying, so that he found himself struggling for breath.

He pulled himself together with a jerk. If his wife was alone in the house with that perfume, he'd better do something about it.

"Anne, I'm home," he called, and stood waiting for her voice to come downstairs to him. He waited in vain. No human sound answered him, but he did hear little, pattering footsteps descending the hall staircase.

Scottie, he thought, and flexed his knees to cushion the bounce of a little black friend against him. There was no bounce, because it wasn't a dog. It wasn't anything that he could see. It pattered down the high, dark stairway, swished around his legs, and went scampering "out in back."

The best part of Kendrick's home was "out in back." "Out in back" was a book-lined study where he spent his mornings reading, writing and listening to Anne moving about in the kitchen. From "Out in back" there came the noon odors of cooking, snatches of bird song, and gentle clickings as Anne opened and closed the huge, new refrigerator which she had purchased impulsively back in February. Anne had made the down payment out of her household savings, and left him only the installments to worry about.

He wasn't worrying about household expenses now, however. His heart was hammering against his ribs and a sickening dread had come into him. Something invisible that scampered was loose in his house, and—

He lifted his golf bag through the front door and wedged it into the umbrella rack at the foot of the stairs.

"Anne?" he called again, loudly.

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Up above there was only silence. Striding through the long house to his study he kept clenching and unclenching his hands and dampening his lips with his tongue.

Time seemed to stand still while he did this, and when he arrived "out in back" he felt as though an eternity had passed over him, filling his mouth with dust.

He tore through the study to the kitchen without stopping to search for changes in the big, sunlit room. The kitchen hadn't changed. Everything was drenched in sunlight and everything was in place. The electric clock above the stove was swinging its red minute hand around in a needlepoint crawl, the refrigerator was humming gently, and the radio by the window was dialed to McCabe's Food Hour, which was Anne's favorite kitchen program.

Kendrick turned his gaze about in a rotating scrutiny which was as reassuring as a tour of inspection could have been. All about him were Little-Boy-Blue-Things dutifully awaiting Anne's return.

He put up a hand to his face. His skin was clammy, cold. Well, that was just too bad, because he wasn't feeling that way now. He had gotten a grip on himself by pinning a half nelson

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on the squirming part of his mind. He was sure he knew now why his neck hairs had risen out in the hall. He had stepped from bright sunlight into the house and the . . . the rat had scurried past him so rapidly that his eyes had drawn a blank.

Sun-dazzle and too much imagination had turned a big, frightened rat into an infinitely more terrifying *unthing*. It chilled him to realize that the house was infested, but rats could be gotten rid of easily enough. A little arsenic mixed with ground glass scattered around would do the trick.

The fragrance was overwhelming now. It filled the kitchen with an urgency which drew Kendrick irresistibly toward the garden.

It was coming from the garden, of course. The kitchen door was ajar and he could see a thin sliver of the garden which he and Anne had planned together.

It was a beautiful garden, filling the entire backyard and his neighbors with envy whenever he took them out and showed them what malt dustings, root prunings and night soil testings could do.

Anne had evidently introduced some new and odoriferous bloom which was flooding the house with a fragrance which was too cloying for comfort. This time she had made a change which was regretable, a change which—

His brain became a cake of ice, freezing his thoughts solid. He had thrown open the kitchen door and was staring out over—a garden in full blood, a garden in which bright-petaled plants cascaded over one another in such riotous profusion that the entire yard seemed a mass of purple, green and vermilion flowers.

Only—it wasn't *his* garden. It wasn't his garden at all. Gone were the yellow-pink moss roses, snapdragons, everlastings, red cardinal climbers and dwarf ageratums which he had set out back in May. Gone, too, were the bush fruit trees and cleft grafted shrubs which he had shortened back, and syringed with tobacco water earlier in the year.

There wasn't a flower in this new garden which was familiar, not a flower which he could name. The blooms were so bright they dazzled his pupils and made his throat ache.

Standing in the midst of the garden was a pot-bellied little figure scarcely three feet in height. His hands were locked around a long-handled rake, and he was staring at Kendrick from beneath the brim of an old straw hat, his eyes squinting against the sun.

Kendrick experienced a sense of being not himself. It was as though someone who lived right at the intersection of Notreal Boulevard and Nowhere Avenue had stepped into his shoes and was using a wax impression of his brain to think with. The wax kept melting and running out of his ears, so that the experiment was hardly a success.

He heard the someone say: "Who are *you?*" but he could only catch snatches of the little figure's petulant reply.

"—hired me. But, honest, mister, I never figured —the gnores. In a garden like this you gotta expect shants and digglies, but gnores are somethin' else again."

"Gnores?"

"Not often do they have gnores. They mustuv been here all along. You got 'em upstairs and down now, I bet, scamperin' through the house and makin' hay while the sun shines. Mister, look, with gnores chewin' at the roots how can I—"

Suddenly Kendrick was himself again. The change in his garden outraged something deep inside him which rose up with swinging fists and clouted the jeebies out of his brain. His eyes blazing, he strode down to the little figure, bent over and dug his fingers into—

Nothing at all. Where the dwarf's shoulders had been there yawned only empty air. Waist and legs faded out more slowly, but faded they did, leaving only a filmy face suspended in the air.

The face vanished with a swish, so quickly that the air about it quivered and backed up against Kendrick's vest. For a moment it seemed to blow over him, freezingly.

Kendrick's teeth were chattering when he went back into the kitchen and mixed himself a bracer—half rye, half ginger ale. He had never been able to take the stuff straight.

The liquor helped him. Upstairs and down it helped him, so that he didn't go off the deep end when he went from room to room and *found no trace of his wife.*

The house seemed *more* than deserted. There was a hollowness in the air, as though even the memory-swish of Anne moving about had been sucked up in a vacuum cleaner—right down to the last rustle.

He stood at the head of the staircase, mopping his brow and staring down into the darkness. There was a faint scampering down below and the perfume was still making him reel. "Oh, Anne, what am I going to do? There are gnores in the house, and I'm alone with them."

A surge of bitterness went through him. You'd think she'd have left a note for him somewhere in the house. A note—

It wasn't until he went into the upstairs bathroom for the second time that he found it, stuck in his shaving mug. With shaking fingers he pulled it out, and read:

Ted darling:

I'll put this in your shaving mug, where you'll be sure to find it when you wash up. If today I have vanished like a rumpeltiltskin away, tomorrow I'll be coming home so fast I'll probably get a ticket.

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Ted, my neurotic little sister wants me to hold her hand and read to her out of a book—Thorne Smith, if I can find him in the library—while she is having her tonsils removed. So I'm taking the coupé, and driving over to East Andover.

I'm taking Scottie with me. You'll find some cold roast beef and a bottle of half-and-half in the refrigerator.

Did you sell Jackson the tractor?

Your loving,

Anne.

Kendrick moistened his lips. There wasn't anything in the note to cause alarm, even though it failed to dispel the feeling that something ghastly had taken place in his absence. There wasn't a word about hiring an ugly little dwarf to tear up his garden. Not a word about—

Something was crawling over the back of Kendrick's hand. It wasn't crawling rapidly, just making a slow snail track between his fingers. Something scratchy, moist.

But so what? There was no screen on the bathroom window and down below was a lush garden, alive with crawling things. Too, June was the month of beetles—of tumblebugs and ladybugs, and weevils with spiny tail feelers.

Who would be alarmed? Not you, and you, and you perhaps, but Kendrick had never before encountered an invisible bug.

He leaped back with a startled cry, jarring a box of dusting powder off the bathroom shelf, and sending it crashing to the floor.

In little flakes the talcum settled down over the bugs. There were several of them crawling up Kendrick's legs, and the white powder made them visible. Aside from the horns which sprouted from both sides of their conical heads they looked a little like silvery-textured carpet bugs grown fat and sluggish from feeding on stale plush.

"In a garden like this you gotta expect shants, and digglies."

Something was cruising around inside Kendrick's clothes. The bugs had evidently mistaken him for a flowering plant. The floor was slippery with them now, and they kept dropping down from the ceiling, and getting into his hair.

A man with courage and will power enough to look facts in the face would never have acted the way Kendrick did. Instead of letting dismay overwhelm him, such a man would have realized that a garden which had been hardened off by a vanishing dwarf would logically attract insects cut from the same cloth. But Kendrick was like everyone else rather than such a man. He choked, and started for the door, his temples pounding.

The door opened just as he reached it, swung in toward him, and almost knocked him down.

The man who had put his full weight on the door was quite the ugliest brute that Kendrick had ever seen. Heavy-jowled, sloe-eyed, and pock-marked by acne, he stood blinking at Kendrick in consternation, his shoulders blocking off the hallway and casting a bulky shadow on the bathtub and another fixture which might have justified his barging in so hastily had he not disclaimed all interest in it.

"My mistake, chum," he muttered. "I was lookin' for the little guy. I thought mebbe he'd be in here. He's supposed to have somethin' for me—a bowl of fruit I gotta eat, right outta the garden. Yur ain't seen him, have you, chum?"

"Well, I—"

"Right outta the garden, chum. Don't ask me what kind of fruit. I wouldn't know, and I ain't curious, see? The judy says I should see the little guy. Apples, plums, peaches, what's the dif? To get outta this lousy clink I'd eat one of them there paddy-tailed rats."

Something was scampering up and down the hall, but Kendrick scarcely heard it.

"The judy is kind of pretty, but she won't stand for no just-you-and-me stuff. Not that dame. She acted like she owned the clink. 'He's my gardener,' she sez. 'When yur see him and eat yur'll see Scarpatti, on account of he has only been dead a week.'"

The big fellow had twisted his head sideways, perhaps unintentionally.

"Boy, that's a hot one. I'm gonna see Scarpatti. A week after I stick a shiv in him—"

Kendrick was staring at the little round black hole in the big fellow's right temple. There was no blood, but the hole had unmistakably been made by a bullet working in.

"You—" Kendrick choked. His knees had turned to jelly, and there was a howling inside his skull. "You . . . you shouldn't be alive."

The big fellow frowned. "That's what the judy said. She steered me over to the mirra, and showed me this here rod crease. I gotta admit she had me scared for a minute, chum. But I'm still around, ain't I? It has to be a gag."

"Yes," Kendrick heard himself saying. "It has to be a gag."

"I gotta find the little guy. Yur sure you ain't seen 'im, chum?"

Chum, you sure you ain't seen him? Chum, *chum,* CHUM, I'm dead, but it has to be a gag. I've a bullet in my brain, but a living dead man is not one iota, jot, atom more shocking than a garden you didn't plant, and shants in your pants.

No more shocking, no more hideous, all things considered.

Kendrick sat staring out the window of a speeding taxi at skewerwood trees in full, luscious bloom. It was still a bright June day, but there was no beauty coming out of it for him now.

He had brushed past the big fellow, torn down the stairs, rushed out hatless into the street and hailed a passing cab, one thought uppermost in his mind. He must see Ralph Middleton before any-

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thing more turned up to push him further along toward— He let his thoughts trail off.

"Where to, buddy?" asked the driver, twisting his head around.

"I told you. Didn't I—"

"No, buddy. You just said I should drive around."

"Oh. The . . . the number is 65 River Street."

"O. K."

Kendrick was shaking like a leaf when he descended in front of Middleton's three-story frame house, and paid the driver off. For one whirling instant he thought he had come to the wrong address. There was an air of desertion about the place which would have made itself felt even without such disheartening manifestations of nontenancy as drawn blinds on all the windows, and the fact that someone had removed the little black sign which told the town in modest lettering that Middleton was a practicing psychiatrist—hours one to three, Sundays by appointment.

But that air, elusive, indefinable, had apparently started off for some other place, lost its way, and strayed into the wrong pew, for no sooner had the cab drawn away from the curb than Middleton appeared on the front lawn, his face gleaming with sweat.

He had come out from behind the porch, but so abruptly that Kendrick was taken aback. The illusion that Middleton had materialized out of thin air was so strong it wasn't dispelled until the psychiatrist reached his side and thumped him affectionately on the shoulder.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Middleton said. "I was just thinking about you—"

Kendrick gulped. "Ralph, I—"

"Say, this is really a break. I was afraid I'd have to leave without saying good-by to my best and oldest friend."

"You mean you're breaking up?"

"Look, old man, come into the house and I'll tell you all about it. Funny thing, I was nailing down the cellar door over my garden hose, and that lawn mower your firm sold me last month and feeling sadder than hell. In a coupla months this place is going to look like the devil."

Silently Kendrick accompanied Middleton into the house and waited while he turned on the hall lamp, and brushed dust from his clothes.

"Mrs. Graham has just finished putting old-fashioned nightshirts on the furniture," he said. "The place looks like a morgue."

"That's all right, Ralph."

"Well, come into the library and we'll have a coupla whiskey-sodas."

In the library Middleton seated himself on a sheet-covered sofa, and motioned Kendrick to a chair that looked a little like a broken-down ghost.

"Ted, what would you say if I told you I'd grabbed off a job at the Riverdale Clinic in New York which will put me up in front. Of course a man under thirty can't expect—"

"That's swell," Kendrick said, moistening his lips.

"Hey, just a minute. Give me a chance to tell you."

Kendrick leaned forward, clasping his hands over his knees, and trying hard to keep his face from breaking loose from its moorings, and floating up over his scalp.

"I'm in serious trouble," he said. "I'm afraid—I'm afraid it's in your department, Ralph."

Middleton raised quizzical blue eyes and stared at him levelly. "You mean you want to consult me *professionally*, Ted?"

Kendrick's eyes told him yes, yes, YES. He leaned still farther forward, clasping and unclasping his hands and shifting about in his seat.

"Well, let's have it," Middleton said.

Mostly while Kendrick talked Middleton remained in one position, but once while Kendrick was loosening his collar he uncrossed his legs, and put the toes of his right foot behind his left ankle.

"So you see," Kendrick concluded. "I've got all the symptoms of—well, something I hoped you'd assure me I haven't got. But while I've been talking to you I've been jockeying myself into a position which I'm not going to retreat from. It's the strong position of accepting the worst, and fighting back from there. Y'see what I mean?"

Middleton nodded approvingly. "I see perfectly. But you're taking all this much too seriously. If ever there was a clear-cut example of what Freud means when he speaks of the ingenuity of the Id—"

"I'm afraid I don't—"

Middleton rose, walked to the bookcase behind him, removed a leather-bound volume and returned to where Kendrick was sitting. Without a word he put the book into Kendrick's hands.

It was Swinburne's "Poems and Ballads."

"The last time you were over here you spent the whole evening chanting those Victorian limericks," he said. "Swinburne was a little boy who never grew up, an alliterative jackanapes with verbalmeningitis. I'd trade in a dozen of the likes of him for one Shelley, but every man to his taste."

"Well?"

"Well, turn to page eighty-six. 'The Garden of Proserpine.' You were reading that last month. Wait, don't turn. I'll quote from memory:

> "Pale beyond porch and portal,
> Crowned with calm leaves she stands
> Who gathers all things mortal,
> With cold, immortal hands.

"You see, she has a garden. Proserpine has, daughter of Zeus and Demeter. What kind of

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garden? A garden of Death. When people die they are supposed to walk into that garden and never come out.

"From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving,
Whatever gods may be,
That no life lasts forever,
That dead men rise up never,
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea."

"But I—"

"Get it? In your mind you have a clear, sparkling picture of Proserpine's garden and her bowl of fruit."

"Bowl of fruit?"

"All right, your conscious mind is a bit rusty on the uptake. But you've read the 'Golden Bough,' and you're subconsciously aware that persons who have found their way into Hades can return to the upper world if they have not tasted the fruit from Proserpine's garden.

"It comes pretty close to being a universal human myth. If you don't believe me, ask a primitive black fellow from Australia or a Caledonian witch doctor. The Greek variant is the most familiar, but to find the prototype of that grim little *vorstellung* you'd have to sit down to tea with Mr. and Mrs. Piltdown. You taste the fruit and you are altogether dead.

"She waits for each and other,
She waits for all men born.

"So what happens? You come back from a nerve-racking business trip with your head in a whirl. You've been trying to sell tractors to guys who are being paid by the government to plow under their farms. The trip has been a flop, but you've a mental picture of yourself relaxing in dressing gown and slippers, with Anne smoothing the wrinkles out of your forehead with her cool, immortal hands.

"But—Anne isn't there. Old Lady Frustration is waiting for you instead, with a rolling-pin cradled in her arms. She swings at you, and you reel. You're so groggy your reading comes back to you, the verses from Swinburne, Frazer's 'Golden Bough.'

"You go out into the garden and everything blurs. You see a garden that isn't there. *Her* garden, Proserpine's, with cold, immortal hands. You see a dwarf she's hired to do the menial work, seeding, pruning, bringing in the sheaves. Demonomania, you understand? Dwarfs, little devils with forked tails, leprechauns, blue bottle imps are all symptomatic of demonomania. And sometimes you have an insect aura.

"You don't have to worry, though. It isn't a psychosis—just neuroticism raised to high C. A

He FOUND THE BODY...
He HAD A MOTIVE...
His FINGERPRINTS WERE ON THE WEAPON...
His WIFE HID THE WEAPON...
but HE WASN'T GUILTY!

○ At least, that's what Andy Bosworth told the police. But he couldn't even convince himself that he was telling the truth—so the police didn't think much of his story.

◎ Andy's right out of real life—and any one of us might land in the same predicament—so don't fail to read SWELL NIGHT FOR A MURDER by Richard Hill Wilkinson, in the August

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phobia. And you've got to remember that you can sometimes have the crawling things without a clear-cut symptomatology."

"But how about the big ape with a bullet hole in his temple?" Kendrick asked. The horror was lifting now. Miraculously it was being dispelled by the astonishing psychiatrist vistas which Middleton was unrolling with the deftness of a jinni warmed by wine.

"Why, don't you see? You brought Proserpine's garden into your home because you had a peg to hang it on. *He* was the peg. You imagined the garden growing up around him. When did the police notify you, by the way?"

Involuntarily Kendrick stiffened, his lips whitening as he returned the psychiatrist's stare. "Huh? The police? What are you talking about?"

It was Middleton's turn to evince agitation. "You mean to say you didn't know?"

Kendrick shook his head.

"Why, I thought . . . I thought, of course, the police would get in touch with you. No reason to, I suppose, except that—well, it gave your wife a nasty jolt, and she may have to appear in court. I should think . . . but wait a minute. Of course. They took it for granted that Anne would wire you."

Kendrick was shaking now in every limb. The vista had stopped unrolling, was buckling into wormy folds. Something was crawling up his back, too—inching along his spine.

"What *is* it?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"Ted, I'm your friend. You've got to remember that. You must have known, which suggests a case history going back for some time rather than a momentary phobia brought on by strain. You must have known, and forgotten that you knew, subconsciously building up the garden to torture yourself *before* you arrived home. It's a little more serious than I thought—"

"In Heaven's name, man, spit it out."

"Well, here is what you really know, Ted, deep in your mind. You know that night before last a thug named Spike Malone held up a jewelry store on Elmhurst Boulevard, fled along Center Street, and ducked into your backyard when the police closed in on him from three sides. He was shot twice, once in the right temple, once in the hip."

"You mean he died in my garden?" Kendrick choked.

"No, he didn't die. They rushed him to the Stonington Hospital, and for all I know he may be still alive. It can happen, you know. If the bullet passes down through the Gyrus Ling—"

Kendrick's face seemed all wrenched apart. "Anne did *not* wire me," he said.

"Oh, come now. You *must* have known."

"I tell you, she didn't. You've got to be careful not to contradict me."

Middleton turned pale. "Now look here, old man. There isn't a thing I wouldn't do for you. I'm your friend, the very best friend you have in the world. I'm postponing New York, because that's the very least I can do, and only the beginning of—"

"He came back to die," Kendrick groaned. "He was mortally wounded, and now—*he's eating the fruit!*"

"Oh, come now. I've explained all that."

"You've explained it too well." Stark anguish looked out of Kendrick's eyes. "I believe in that garden now, Middleton. I *believe* in it."

Middleton seemed not to hear him. He was squirming about in his seat and scratching himself, as though he had been suddenly assailed by a legion of ticks.

Abruptly, as Kendrick stared, the psychiatrist's jaw jigged downward, and his lips began to jerk. Convulsively to squirm and jerk, as though all the words which he had uttered were rushing frantically back into his mouth.

Anne Kendrick drew in to the curb beneath skewerwood trees in full, luscious bloom. Humming "I'm Mad at the Moon 'Cause the Moon Won't Talk," she silenced the car's throbbing motor, lifted an all-night bag over the back seat, and descended to the sidewalk with her skirts fluttering up about her knees.

She moved buoyantly across the sidewalk and into the shadow of the house. She glanced up, smiling, and for an instant thought of calling out: "Ted darling, I'm back."

But no, better to slip quietly into the house and surprise him.

He'd probably be in the library "out in back," reading or making out his monthly sales' report, and entirely oblivious to sounds from the street.

The fragrance surprised her even before she got the door open, filling the vestibule with a sweetness which made her choke.

"Hm-m-m," she thought, "lucky I'm not Katie with her tonsils wrapped in gauze. Katie wouldn't like all that fragrance, you can bet.

"Anne girl," she thought, "you're home again, and in a moment you'll be in the arms of a pretty nice chap. All things considered, a husband to be proud of, and a worth-while addition to *any* woman's house."

Her key clicked in the lock. Still humming, she stepped into the lower hallway, and set her bag down at the foot of the stairs.

The fragrance was really something. It filled her with a vague uneasiness suddenly, so that she ceased to smile.

Now what had Ted done? Gone down to the dime store and bought a novelty plant—one of those yellow African air orchids that were supposed to bloom overnight? You put the orchid

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in a bowl, dry, and it was supposed to draw nourishment from the air and really blossom out. Would such a plant have an odor like that?

Down the hall she tiptoed, telling herself that she was not going to allow a mere odor to spoil her homecoming. The library was hushed and dark, but there was an air of recent occupancy in the room which dispelled her unreasoning dread until she heard someone say, not loudly, but with a menacing inflection that chilled her heart like ice: "You're gonna eat, see? Just because you find a shurm in this here apple ain't no reason for refusin' to put on the feed bag. You're keepin' these gentlemen waiting."

"To hell with them," said a second voice. "I ain't gonna eat no pink maggots."

A third voice interposed. "Very curious. He is compensating for a malignant inferiority complex *even now.* Blustering, putting on an act."

"You see? This gentleman is a sick-eye-atwist. He knows what you are. He's got you dead to rights."

"You may as well eat, Spike," said a fourth voice. "You're going out into the garden, and you're not coming back."

"That's what *you* think, chum."

"I don't think. I know. We're all in this together."

"I don't see why *you* have to eat, chum?"

"I don't either, Spike. But I do. I was having a quiet little talk with Dr. Middleton on the other side of town when we both realized we would have to eat, too. Spike, somehow, I feel very sorry for you. You're a social menace, but it wasn't your fault exactly. All your life something inside you has felt kicked around.

> "Of every million lives how many a score
> Are failures from their birth?"

"You'd better stick to Swinburne, Ted," the third voice said. "He wasn't as great as Shelley, but sometimes he hit the nail on the head.

> "And all dead years draw hither,
> And all disastrous things."

"So yur poits, eh? I gotta eat with a coupla rhyme-spoutin', wrist-slappin' poits."

"No, Spike. We're not poets. This gentleman is a psychiatrist, and I sell farm implements."

Anne had turned as pale as death. The voices were right in the room with her. Her husband's voice was the loudest; Dr. Middleton's fainter, but vibrant; the man called Spike gruff, but extremely faint.

Suddenly she heard a crunching sound, followed by an angry grunt.

"Yur call this an orange?"

"Sure it's an orange," said the first voice. "I grew it myself. A blue, bitter-rind orange. What you complainin' about?"

"Nothin' much. Just that this ain't my idea of an orange, yur little squirt. I oughtta cram it down yur throat."

"You better eat, fella. You put it off too long, and you'll be gaggin' on a funnel drip."

Crunch, crunch.

"Yur gotta lot tur learn about fruit growin,' squirt. Ef I wasn't so set on gettin' outta this mangy clink—"

There was a scraping sound, as though a chair had been pushed back by someone getting up.

"He's gone," Ted's voice said.

"You mean he's goin'," the first voice amended. "You can't see him now, but he's walkin' out into the garden."

There was a momentary hush. Then Dr. Middleton's voice said: "Well, am I next?"

"You are, buddy," said the first voice. "What'll it be? For a gentleman like you I rekamend a bunch of very hollow grapes."

"I have never liked grapes," Middleton said. "I'll take a peach."

There was another crunch.

"He ate that like a man," the first voice said.

"Give me the bowl," Ted's voice groaned. "I'll take a— Oh, Anne darling, if I could just—"

"If you could see her, buddy, you'd be sweatin' buckets."

"What do you mean?"

"Buddy, take a look at yourself. You want *her* to look like that?"

Ted's voice groaned.

"Buddy, givin' advice is out of my line, but if my wife didn't hafta eat I wouldn't ask to see her. No use givin' the Three Spinning Sisters ideas. You see what I mean?"

"I see what you mean. The people I can see are going to die."

"Oh, *don't.*" The first voice quivered as though in pain. "They just hafta eat, that's all. Don't use that word again, buddy."

"I drove over to Middleton's place in a cab," Ted's voice said. "I saw the driver."

"He's gonna eat, too, buddy, but he don't know it yet. His pump is missin' every second beat."

"I see. And Middleton was . . . Middleton was . . . the drawn blinds—"

"You're smart, buddy. Middleton was in New York drivin' around in your car. His house here is shut up tight."

"But I sat in his library and talked to him—not twenty minutes ago."

"Sure you did, buddy. You both came home to eat. Where could you find a better garden? I been workin' over it, just for you three guys. The big guy was shot here, and you—this is your home. *She* figured three together like that, all

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from the same town, aughtta sit down at the same table. Smart, eh? Saves time and trouble."

Suddenly a new voice spoke. Coldly, austerely, and as though from a great height. "Eat now. You have talked enough."

"Hi, ya, goddess," Kendrick's voice said. It was taut with anguish, but Kendrick had always vowed he would go with a jest. It was something he had thrashed out with himself in his fourteenth year.

"I'll take a plum," he said. "Fortunately I can *see* the fruit. The bowl is a little misty around the edges, but it isn't invisible. I couldn't see the shants and digglies, but this plum—"

The first voice gasped. "You couldn't *see* the shants?"

"Not until I spilled some dusting powder on them," Kendrick said.

"Could you see the gnores?"

"No."

"Buddy, look. You walk out into that garden pulling a gag, and you'll wish you were never born."

"I didn't see the gnores," Kendrick reiterated. "Now, if you don't mind, I'll—"

"Do not eat," said the high, austere voice.

"Mistress, it's just a gag. The car turned over three times."

"He must not eat."

"Make up your mind," Kendrick almost screamed.

The austere voice said: "I can see him now. He is sitting up in bed. He is asking for his wife. There is a doctor and a nurse standing beside him. The nurse . . . the nurse is *smiling*, you little worm. I ought to have you thrashed."

"It wasn't my fault, mistress. I swear it wasn't my fault. He had a temperature of one hundred and six."

Two faces, a man's and a woman's, appeared simultaneously in the room—one on a level with Anne's eyes, and the other high up under the ceiling. The woman's face was thick-lipped, Negroid, and crowned with a circlet of gleaming flowers.

The man—Anne caught her breath—was regarding her tenderly. He was trying hard to smile, Ted was. She could see his body now, mistily, and the outlines of a table, and a pot-bellied little figure scarcely three feet tall with a bowl of fruit in his hands.

Down from the woman's face streamed a long, flowing robe. She was stooping a little now, and her eyes were wide, staring. Suddenly as Anne swayed, they seemed to fill the room. Two enormous orbs mirroring metal-gray skies, and a waste of tumbled sand that seemed to stretch out endlessly in all directions. In the depths of the sky vultures wheeled, and for an instant there was a carrion taint in the room.

Then—the eyes grew small again. There was a glimmer of purple light, and faces, table and bowl of fruit dwindled to luminous motes which darted about for an instant in the shadowed, quiet room and were suddenly gone.

"Long distance calling. Mrs. Kendrick? *Mrs.* Kendrick. K-e-n-d-r-i-c-k? This is long distance calling. Here is your party, sir."

"Hello, Ted? *Ted?* Oh, my darling, my poor dear—"

"Anne, hold on tight. I've had an accident, but I'm all right now, and you've got to stay steady. I wouldn't be phoning, and talking in a calm, quiet way if I wasn't all right. You realize that, don't you?"

"I know, darling, I know—"

"I've been unconscious for twenty-six hours, but now they are going to give me something to eat. I'm sitting up, and the nurse on duty here is holding my hand, and I'm telling myself it's your hand I'm holding."

"I'm not jealous, darling."

"Dear, I . . . I tried to play the Good Samaritan. Yesterday I dropped in at the Riverdale Clinic to see how Middleton was standing the gaff. He wasn't standing it so well. He said he felt like chucking the new job, and going back to Lynnbrook. He looked so played out I suggested eighteen holes of golf, and a spin on the Bronx River Parkway. We were leaving Grassy Sprain when a road skunk came out from behind a truck and pushed me off the road."

"Ted, I . . . please hold the wire. Just for a second. I don't feel so—"

"Anne, are you all right? *Anne! Answer me.*"

"Gulpullul. Yes, I . . . I feel better now . . . Ted . . . darling."

"You sure? You want me to hold the wire while you get something?"

"No, dear. I've got something right here . . . a straight brandy."

"Anne, this may sound sort of screwy, but—is our garden all right?"

"Yes, it is, Ted. I was just out there."

"I must have been delirious all last night. I thought, I thought—"

"I know, Ted darling. But we've got our own beautiful garden back now."

"Your time is up, sir."

"Operator, operator, listen. This is an emergency call."

"His time is *not* up, operator. He's going to live to be a hundred and six. I don't know what's in store for you, but he's going to grow old along with me. Park that with your gum, and step back from the line, young lady."

THE END.

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THE BARGAIN

By Cleve Cartmill

Miss Lucy had a paper—a thing that Death had to have. And she wanted immortality. So she wanted to make a bargain. But—was immortality a thing a human being could endure?

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

No, I can't stop you. I admit it. If a man has any rights at all, the first is the right to take his own life.

So I can't keep you from it if you're bound to. Don't aim to try. The business office would raise hell with me, even if it did play hob with their bookkeepin'. But I can point out a thing or two if you just leave that gun in the drawer and relax for a minute.

Paul Roberts, aren't you? Your name on the door, is how I know. Got a rotten memory for names. Used to carry my accounts around in my head, but that was when only Adam, and Eve, and Cain, and Enoch, and Irad, and Methujael, and a few more made up the list.

Can't remember 'em all any more, what with so many, and me gettin' along, too.

Oh, I could fit you in, Paul. It's not laziness

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that brings me here. No, you'll find me accommodatin', if nothing else, even with a full schedule like I got these days.

It's just not your time, that's all. You got a lot of things ahead of you, and if you don't shoot yourself again, you'll be able to live 'em. That first shot wasn't quite enough, and surgery bein' what it is, won't leave much of a scar.

No, I can't tell you what those things might be. The rules are pretty rigid, and I got to live up to 'em, seein' as I made 'em in the first place. If I get slack, you can see what it would do to the staff.

Can't give you a look, either, at what you'd be runnin' into. Adam wanted that. But I couldn't break the rules even for him. Couldn't even tell him if he'd see Abel. So he held out long after his time. Kept me waitin' around for darned near a thousand years. Cheated me for all he was worth.

Got my scythe right after that. That stopped 'em from cheatin'. Smack 'em a couple of times with it and they come along like sheep, right on schedule.

I'll stand it here in the corner till we see if you're goin' to need it. Some says I ought to throw it away, that it's outdated. But it's like a friend to me, and it always works. Which is more than you can say of that electric clock my efficiency man had.

It was right after Hitler started for Paris. My whole staff was workin' overtime, and I was personally supervisin' the job in Europe. We had to bring the regulars over from America to help, and I had nobody but green apprentices to replace 'em with. Would've worked out all right, if one of 'em hadn't started his survey.

Well, you know. New man on the job, wants to make a name right off. He was right, too, in a way. And I did sort of tell him to go ahead.

"Chief," he says to me just before he started for that part of the country called California or something like that, "chief, many of them suffer past their time. That isn't efficient. I'd like permission to improve the system."

"Son," I told him, "you'd have to begin with the bookkeepin' department, and you know the business offices won't stand for it. Then, when you got it straightened out, if they'd let you work on it, you'd find the field staff wasn't big enough."

That's where the real trouble always has been. We just can't get to 'em all the time, right on the dot. Was a time, 'way back when, that we could handle the job. But they kept increasin' so fast that pretty soon we were understaffed and a lot of 'em just had to wait overtime till we could get around to 'em.

Course, there was a mistake now and then that wasn't our fault. A card would come out, and we'd pick up that person only to find out too late that some clerk had sent out the wrong card.

But I admitted that our efficiency wasn't a hundred percent, and told this apprentice so.

"Things are slack in America," I said. "If you want to try out something, I got no strong objections. How do you figure to go at it, son?"

He shows me this clock, then. Electric, with curved blades for hands. Pretty, it was, and silent.

"I made it," he says, sort of proud. "I put a batch of cards in here, you see, and when the hands reach the time marked in the right-hand corner, out pops the card. If I can't take the call myself, I can relay it to somebody not so busy."

"I don't hold with such things, myself," I says. "If they break down at the wrong time, you're in a mess right. Now would be a good time to try it, though. I won't tell you to go ahead, but I won't tell you not to, either."

I don't know what it was happened. Maybe the wrong cycle or something, but, anyway, this clock got three days behind. He didn't tell me till a state of emergency come up. Said he didn't want to bother me, busy as I was twenty-four hours a day with the overload in Europe.

Well, I dropped everything and come over quick. Sure enough, it was a real emergency. All on account of that clock, a scientist in one of the colleges had been able to complete an experiment and work out the secret of immortality.

Jensen, Jannings, Bronson—I forget his name. Don't matter, anyway. Course, we all knew he was workin' on it. Knew he'd find it, too, if he was let alone.

His card come out from the business office, with all the dope on it and the exact time to take him, just before he hit on the last factor. But the apprentice was fiddlin' with his clock tryin' to get it back to shape, and overlooked his job. Wouldn't 've happened if he'd stuck to the old way.

Well, I took over. I dropped in to see this professor. He hadn't told the papers yet, and I had to see that all his notes were destroyed.

He was in his office, just beginnin' to write an article. I waited till he put the title down. It was "Now We Are Immortal." Then I showed myself. He was like a tethered lamb lookin' at a tiger, tremblin' and shiverin'.

But he had a funny kind of spunk, too, that little man. Even while he was shakin', and his eyes pretty near as big as his glasses, he grinned. A kind of be-damned-to-you grin, like he had something I couldn't touch.

He was right.

But I didn't find that out till later. Right then I eased his head over on that paper, with its "Now We Are Immortal," and looked around for his notes.

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I found 'em, what he'd been workin' on for three years. Formulas and equations. Everything, and all of it wrong. Everything except that one little fact which anybody could use to make himself immortal.

Well, I went over the office again to be sure I hadn't missed it. Then I left him, with his pen tight in his dead hand. It wasn't there, and I had to find it. Electric clocks! Efficiency!

The business department didn't like to send out a special investigator on what ought to have been a routine case. I didn't like to ask for one, either. But I had to find the thing and see it destroyed. Otherwise there would be the devil and all to pay.

That was when Miss Lucy Walburn come into it. Oh, I know her name, all right. You don't forget Miss Lucy.

The investigator gave me the facts and I went out to call on her, dressed like I was from an insurance company, with a satchel and a pocket full of fountain pens.

She was weedin' a bed of flowers around one of the trees in her yard, and when I come up her flagstone walk she stood up and took off her gardenin' gloves.

It was easy to see why that little professor grinned even when he knew it was his time. If you had something you wanted kept safe, Miss Lucy was the one to give it to. She had keen and honest eyes, sort of grayish, and she walked like she wasn't ashamed of anything as she come across the lawn.

"Yes?" she says.

I put on a face for her. "I am afraid, Miss Walburn," I says, "that I bring sad news. If we might go inside—"

"Tell me," she says. No fuss and bother, and no goin' inside yet, either.

So I told her about her professor friend, and how he left his estate, and I needed her signature. Well, it was true, and a real insurance man would call on her the next day. Even at that, though, I felt sort of guilty about the deep hurt I gave her.

I could tell. It was 'way down inside, and not the hurt a young woman gets. She didn't start thinkin' about who would take his place. No, she took it like a woman right at the top of her prime; she'd lost a friend.

"I'm terribly sorry," she says. "Come in."

Inside it was like her yard, neat and cheerful. A few seeds scattered around under the canary's cage was a friendly touch.

She waved me into a chair. "How did it happen?" she says.

I told her a story, soothin'like, and pretty soon her hands are not tight fists any longer. She looked at the canary as he filled his throat with song, and smiled.

"Jackie was the last present he gave me," she says.

Which gave me an openin'. "There was a paper, Miss Walburn. I have his authorization to take it."

I pulled the order out of my satchel and gave it to her. She put on her glasses and looked it over careful. Lines come back to her forehead, just under her brown hair, and she didn't say anything for a long time.

"No," she says finally. "It isn't true."

"What, ma'am?"

"This authorization. It is exactly contrary to what he told me to do in case of his death. I am to read the document referred to here, and turn it over to the proper authorities. Therefore, I shall not surrender it to you."

"I'm sorry, Miss Walburn," I says, "but you must. A court will order it."

"Let the courts order. I'll admit this looks like his signature, but I also know how much that paper meant to him. And this is exactly opposite to his instructions to me. He repeated them last night. 'Lucy,' he said, 'I've come through another day. But remember, if I should get killed before I see you again, don't let that envelope out of your hands till you've read what's inside. It will turn the course of civilization.' Those were almost his exact words. You can see how foolish that makes this scrap of paper."

Well, it was time for her to see how things stood, so I showed her who I was. Her eyes got a little wider for a minute, then she laid her glasses aside and folded her hands.

"So," she says. "So."

"Yes, Miss Lucy. You're bound to give that paper to me, now."

"He found out, didn't he?"

"Yes'm."

"How to live forever. That's what the paper is. Oh, what a farce!" she cries, her eyes bitter and her pretty mouth all twisted. "What rotten unfairness!"

"How's that, Miss Lucy?"

"To let us slave, and sweat, and drive ourselves to learn how to live, and come to nothing in the end! To let a splendid man like him find life only to have it snatched away! You—obnoxious old man!"

"Why, it's not my fault, Miss Lucy," I says. "I guess I get around to most everybody sometime, but not because I wish 'em harm. It's my *job*, Miss Lucy. I got my orders, same as anybody."

"Well, it's silly!" she snaps.

"But it's regulations, ma'am."

"Then it's a rotten trick," she says. "We are allowed to hope that we are masters of our fate.

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We conquer the world, make it safe and productive. Then noblemen—yes, noblemen!—devote their lives to man's last enemy, death. One by one, thousands of them, they lie down on the last great altar, each leaving behind a step toward the goal. Then, to reach it at last only to find that all have been the victims of a bitter jest—that is unforgivable. That is the vicious insult of the person, or thing, or being, or force, who toys with his painted puppets."

"Miss Lucy," I broke in, "I can't tell you why this is. I'm forbidden to. And I don't want to argue. All I want is the envelope."

She tipped her head back and gave me a level stare. "Do your worst, old crooked man," she says. "With Koch, and Lister, and Erlich, and Pasteur and all the rest, I'll keep the trust I have been given."

Well, I just naturally got to make her start thinkin' straight, so I says, "Look here, Miss Lucy, you don't want that information to become public property."

"Don't I?" she asks. "Why?"

"Well, ma'am, even without considerin' my job and how it would wipe out my whole department, it would be one of the worst things you could do."

"How is that?" she says.

"Man bein' what he is," I tell her, "he fights and kills his own kind. Well, now, just suppose he gets to be immortal. Why, ma'am, it would just be war forever, and no happiness anywhere. Way it is, mostly the ones who rule have done more harm than good, what with wars and conquest. If they couldn't die off and give the human race a breathin' spell now and then, it would just be stinkin' awful, beggin' your pardon."

"Yes," she says, thoughtful, "I can see your point." Then she gives me a shrewd look. "I've got something you want, and you'd have killed me if you could get it without my co-operation, wouldn't you?"

"I wouldn't say that's exactly right, ma'am."

"Then why don't you kill me and get it over with? I'm not afraid of you."

"Well, Miss Lucy, it's not your time yet. I can't just take you, lessn I got a notice from the business office."

"Then why don't you just destroy that envelope?"

"There are some things I can't tell you, ma'am. But I can tell you this—I got to see you destroy it yourself without showin' it to anybody else."

"Suppose I refuse. What then?"

"I'm not goin' to let anybody, not even you, see what's in that envelope, Miss Lucy. Even if I do have to take you before your time, I'll do it. You and anybody else who might get hold of it."

"It's in my safety-deposit box at the bank."

"Yes, ma'am. I know."

"And you can't get it out, can you?"

"Miss Lucy," I says, "don't press me."

"It's obvious that you can't," she says. "Otherwise you wouldn't have come here at all. You'd have gone straight to the bank. Well! Let me think."

Well, she picked up her glasses and whirls 'em with one hand, hummin' a pretty tune to herself. This starts the canary singin' again, and between the two of 'em it's right nice in that cool little room. I changed back to the insurance man, and set down in the chair again while she goes right on hummin'. Pretty soon she lays down the glasses and looks at me, smilin' a little.

"I'll make you a bargain, old crooked man."

"I reckon you didn't understand me, Miss Lucy," I says. "I come after that envelope."

"Exactly." She smiles. "But you can't get it unless I help. If you kill me for refusing to help, then you'll have to stand guard over that deposit vault and kill every person who starts to open it. Right?"

I didn't make her an answer, but she goes right on.

"As time goes on, the dead will pile up around that bank. You'll be forced to kill and kill, but eventually somebody will get it, or you must kill off the entire human race. For you know as well as I that when the first few die, the curiosity of others will be around. And once you have made people curious, they will die right down to the last man to satisfy that curiosity."

That is exactly what I was thinkin', but I don't let on.

"Will you listen to my bargain?" she asks.

"I can listen," I says, "but I can't make a bargain with a human bein'."

"Bring my professor back to life," she says. "We'll destroy the envelope, and he'll forget his secret. We'll be happier, then, as long as we live, knowing that he was working against stacked cards. We can forget his work, and think of ourselves."

"Miss Lucy," I says, "I've been too kindly with you. I've been gabbin' like a old woman. This is serious, and your proposition don't flatter your intelligence any. Such a thing is completely impossible. The little professor is gone, and I can't bring him back."

"But other people have come back to life," she insists, and points out a couple.

"It was out of my hands," I explains. "I had done my job, and done it handsome. Lazarus was dead, right on schedule. Anything happened after that was out of my department. Same with the widow's son. I had nothin' to do with it."

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"All right, then. Make me immortal!"

It wasn't the first time I'd had that request, but it gave me a start just the same. You'd have expected her, maybe, to ask me to take her, so she could be with the professor, or at least because she'd think she'd be with him. But you wouldn't expect anybody who thinks twice about it to ask to be made immortal.

Reason is there's nothing that rightly equals the lonesomeness of growin' older, after all your friends die off. Nobody to talk to, lessn it's little tots, because the grown-ups don't want to hear about the good old days, and they don't want to take you with 'em social.

I've seen a few, where somebody slipped up and their cards didn't come out. They just kept right on livin', more and more lonesome each day. Mostly when I went after 'em, they was so glad to see me they cried and reached out their hands. No, there's nothin' much worse, I reckon, and I didn't expect Miss Lucy to ask it.

I pointed out the drawbacks, and she says, "But I don't want to grow any older. I'm at a nice age. Any attention I get now is from persons what are interested in me in the large sense, not in the narrower sense which causes young men and boys to cluster around women. No, old man, my proposal is that I stay at about this age forever."

"Miss Lucy," I says, "I won't do it."

"Very well," she answered. "Kill me, then. For I won't give you the envelope, otherwise."

"Tell you what I will do, though," I says. "You give me your word you won't touch that envelope, and I'll prove to you that you don't want to be immortal."

"I'll give you my word," she says, "but you can't prove that, I'm sure. Think of it, you funny old man! Think of watching the world march, and march! Think of being able to start a flower garden you're certain you can finish! We don't really take much interest in the world and our opportunities to grow, because we know everything ends in death. That knowledge fills our lives with frenzy, a frantic rushing through as many experiences as possible before the inevitable end. With immortality I could relax, and learn to live, and that is the sum of all knowledge, I think."

"But after a hundred pears, Miss Lucy, all your friends will be dead, and every place the faces will be strange. You'll be lonesome as all get out. You won't like it. I know."

"I'm willing to chance it," she says. "A person could learn to live with grace, and beauty, if he could spend eternity at it. Aside from that, I have nothing to lose. Your arguments don't frighten me. I have no relatives, and I had only one friend. Strange faces, old man? I'll learn to know them."

"I'll show you, ma'am," I says, and went away.

I checked with the main office on Miss Lucy Walburn. She told me the truth. She's all by herself, except for her bird, and she's got nobody she's close to but a little girl next door, about five. She is a little curly-haired tyke who calls on Miss Lucy every day, and they play house. And Miss Lucy buys her a new dress now and then, or a hair ribbon.

She's got practically nothing to live for, you might say, and yet she wants to live forever. Me, I got to stop that, not only for her sake, but for mine. Oh, I could get away with it, but it would cause trouble, especially if Miss Lucy should get herself famous later on.

On top of that, I got to get that envelope destroyed, no matter what. That's one thing the front office is really touchy about, immortality bein' solved by man.

So I got blank requisitions for the little girl and her family. And I got some help from another department, to wither up her flowers and kill her grass and trees.

I kept busy on routine for a few days, waitin' for all the green things on her place to die. Then I sent an assistant after the little girl, and told him to take the canary in passin'.

I got out to her house a little later, and I must say the fire and pestilence department was literal-minded about the trees and flowers. People drivin' by in cars would stop and look at Miss Lucy's place for a while, then drive on shakin' their heads.

I started to knock, as I was the insurance man again, but I waited when I heard her little song. She had just found out her bird was dead. In the bustle about the little girl, I guess she had overlooked it till then. From the way it sounded, she was tryin' to make him sing again.

Well, I guess I've heard about all the music there is, from the early chantin' right up to date. But even the heavenly choir, back in the beginnin' when it still had zip, never sung like that, like Miss Lucy to her dead canary.

After a while, I knocked.

She came to the door, and her eyes were big and solemn gray. But she wasn't cryin', though I could see down deep to the scars left by the flowers, and the fresher scars. She just opened the door without a word, and showed me to a chair.

After a long time, I broke the quiet. "Miss Lucy," I says. "You can see, now, how it would be."

She studied on this. Then she looked at me like I was a spoiled egg she had just popped in a frying pan.

"You cheated," she says. "You tried to trick me. God help me, I almost didn't see through it. I can see how it would be, you say. Indeed! How can I see? I am mortal still. How can I tell what

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my reactions would be if I were eternal?"

"I don't get you, ma'am," I says.

"Really! Can I say," she asks, "what I would do if I were somebody else? Obviously I cannot, for I am not that person. These events which you have caused in the past few days have hurt me deeply, I'll admit. But they hurt because I am adjusted to the slow process of dying. Like every mortal, I feel a sharp sense of loss when someone dear to me is cut down by the insensate sword of time. We know, with a dull and dread certainty, that we cannot replace them. We have so little time!"

"Well—"

"But," she cuts in, "if we knew that the resistless creep of death was stopped, if your advance was blocked, how would we feel? I cannot say certainly, for I do not have that knowledge, but I mean to have it, old man, I mean to have it!"

"Miss Lucy, you're askin' for eternal heartbreak, and I don't like it, a nice lady like you! I won't give it to you."

She opens her hands and puts them hard against her cheeks.

"Then kill me, for Heaven's sake! Kill me and get it over. You will get no envelope from me, except by paying for it."

I didn't say anything for a while, thinkin' about all the people who would have to be taken before their time at the bank, and tryin' to figure some way to avoid it.

Then I says, "I got one more thing to show you, Miss Lucy. If it proves what I say about immortality, will you tear up the envelope?"

"If it's proof, yes."

"And if you still want it after that, Miss Lucy, I'll make a trade with you. Eternal life to destroy the secret."

As I was goin' away, I saw one of my apprentices comin', the one that made the clock and started all the trouble.

"Wait a minute, son," I calls as he turns into Miss Lucy's. "Where you goin'?"

"Oh, hello, chief," he says. "I didn't recognize you. Oh, this is just a routine call." He looks at the card. "Lucy Walburn, spinster, forty-six, at this address. No need to bother you with it."

"Let me see that card, son. When did it come out?"

"Just a few minutes ago."

I took the card. "You run along and tend to your knittin', boy," I says. "I'll handle this one."

Can't say I relished it much, bein' rushed for time that way. But even as I hurried off after Finklestein, I was thinkin' how lucky I was to be there when Miss Lucy was sent for. A body can't think of everything, and that was one I'd overlooked. Course, I'd be a little late in accountin' for her, but with the whole staff overworkin' in Europe it would be understandable.

Anyway, I had her card and was sure she'd be there when I brought Finklestein to see her. If he'd do it, of course.

Can't say I was ever rightly comfortable around him. Not that he wasn't nice to me. After that one time he broke down, takin' on something terrible, he never asked me again to take him. That was about five hundred years after the curse was put on him, and he hadn't yet got the feel, you might say, of eternity.

No, after that we got along all right. Not friends, of course. I kept my distance. But I did a couple of favors for him, about wives, and I guess he hadn't called me a clumsy old fool for several centuries.

As I say, though, I never did feel right around him. It was better after he got the dark glasses, but still there was something about him. Maybe it was because he made me see how *necessary* my job is, and what a responsibility I got.

He had a tailor shop again, and I told him what I wanted him to do. He put on a hat and locked the door, and we went back to Miss Lucy's.

"This is Mr. Finklestein," I says.

"Sit down, gentlemen," Miss Lucy says. "If the light is too strong for your eyes, Mr. Finklestein, I can draw the shades."

"I wear these glasses for another reason," he says. "Miss Walburn, do you know who I am?"

Miss Lucy studies him. "No," she says, "I've never seen you before. You might be any moderately successful businessman, well preserved and healthy. But . . . there *is* something about your mouth. It's—well, bitter."

"And well it may be," he says, quietlike.

Miss Lucy puts her hand to her mouth. "Finklestein. You're not—"

He nods his head. "I am."

She begins to feel that thing in Finklestein that makes you uncomfortable. Her hands are tight shut, but her jaw is still set, and she waits for him to say something.

"I understand," he says, "that you have heard all the conventional arguments against immortality."

"Yes," she answers.

"I won't repeat them, then. I can only tell you this. If you become immortal, you cease to live, in the psychological sense, before many centuries have passed."

"Rubbish," says Miss Lucy.

"Not so, Miss Walburn. Consider this. The creed of man in general is that life is merely preparation for something beyond. His whole existence is based on the certainty of death and consequent existence on another plane. That is

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why he endures pain and sorrow, hardship and disappointment, to fit himself better for that next life. That is why he does not take his own life, for by the taking of it he cuts short that necessary training period." He looked at me. "Isn't that true?"

"Well," I says, "there are some things I can't tell you. But I'm agin' suicide."

"And for what other reason?" Finklestein says. "Very well, consider what happens when that entire philosophy is blasted by immortality. You are unable to die, and, therefore, have no reason to live."

"I don't believe you," Miss Lucy says. "Oh, I don't doubt that it has affected you that way, Mr. Finklestein, and I sympathize with you. But you must remember that you began with handicaps which I don't have. In the first place, you are of a persecuted race and have seen that persecution flare up now and then. That alone would give you a twisted perspective, would prevent your thinking—living—on a broad psychological base. No reason to live, you say? What better reason than to watch the world grow, and advance?"

"Advance?" says Finklestein. "You will see only repetitions of cycles that began with Columbus. Men will pioneer other planets, set up new civilizations which will come under the domination of a few and enslave the majority. When these are overcrowded with labor because of technological progress, they will pioneer yet new planets and set up civilizations which will duplicate what we have now. And so on through eternity. The novelty wears thin, I assure you."

Miss Lucy stood up and looked at us. "When I asked for immortality," she says, "I had given the problem little thought. It was a spur-of-the-moment request. But, after thinking on it, I believe the advantage of being able to grow forever, in the psychological sense, outweighs the disadvantages of loss of friends, boredom, and the vicious circle you so blackly draw. Furthermore, there is one argument you can't answer. If you can, I shall accede to the old man's wish. I'll tear up the envelope and live my life to its normal end."

I fingered her card, then. She was already overdue.

"If you can't answer it, however," she goes on, "I shall insist on eternal life—on my terms. I have the power to do so, or demand that I die now. My point is this: neither you nor anybody else can say how I would react to certainty of life forever. I can't even guess how I would behave, for my whole psychology is geared to dying. I have been dying, as all men have, since I drew my first breath. That knowledge governs my attitude toward life. But if I were immortal, I believe that I should maintain a growing interest in life forever, and I do not think that you can shake that belief. You have reacted in the manner you described, but you are not I. You cannot say how I would react."

Finklestein studied on this for a while. Then he got to his feet, too, and stood facing Miss Lucy. They didn't move for maybe half a minute. Finally, Finkelstein reaches for his glasses.

"I have one argument left," he says. "Look!"

And he takes off his dark glasses.

Well, it shakes Miss Lucy, that look in his eyes. Nineteen centuries of bitterness is there for her to see. She turns white, bites her lip, and looks away.

Finklestein put on his glasses, nodded at me, and went out.

I waited for Miss Lucy to speak, waited quite awhile before she looked up from the floor.

"But he isn't Lucy Walburn!" she cries. "It wouldn't do that to me . . . would it?"

I can't answer that one.

"Still," she says, thoughtful, "it might, it might. So, therefore . . . I want your assurance that if I ever want to die, if I find life no longer desirable, if it becomes unendurable—I want your promise that you will kill me, for I will not let time do that to my eyes."

"You're just naturally bound to try it, ma'am?"

"Yes," she says.

"All right, I promise. The front office won't like this," I says, and tears up her card.

She watches the scraps fall to the floor, like I watch the pieces of the envelope a little later at the bank.

She was in a lot worse way than you, Paul Roberts. You've tried to take your own life for reasons that seem good to you, but they don't compare with hers. She didn't have nothing, but she not only wanted to keep on livin', she wanted to live forever.

You're comin' out of it now, so I'm takin' my scythe and goin' about my business. You think on it tomorrow, and you'll see that Miss Lucy had a lot of nerve. She knew what she was runnin' up against, and sometimes it's a lot harder to keep goin' when you know what's comin' than if you don't. Like you. You don't know what life's got in store for you, but you can bet it'll be something. It always has been.

Paul Roberts spoke: "What happened to her? How long did she last?"

"She's still goin' strong, son," Death replied. "And that was three thousand years ago."

THE END.

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THOUGH POPPIES GROW

By Lester del Rey

They served—they died—for an ideal once. What would they feel of this new struggle?

Illustrated by M. Isip

Vaguely he was aware that he should have been some heroic figure, stalking along with his head up and the fire of high devotion in his eyes. His shoes should have gleamed brightly, his chin should have been firm and square, and there should have been a glint of devil-may-care recklessness in his expression, an appealing quirk to the smile he should be wearing. For a few seconds, he tried to simulate the dashing, heroic figure in his mind, but the best he could do was a wry grimace at his own thoughts.

Service shoes, mud spattered, scratched, and with a hole picked out of one toe, were blunt and heavy on his feet—there'd been no time for polish. The wrap-around leggings were correctly done, but, somehow, they were lacking in any trim smartness. And the dirty suit of khaki was hardly the raiment of a hero, especially when topped by a trench cap roughly mended. A cord around the tight collar sup-

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ported a grim gas mask, and a lumpy rucksack was on his back, but the holster on his hip was empty; his hands felt lost without a rifle and bayonet in them.

"Lost" was the right word; his whole feeling was one of being lost, of wandering in a dirty fog, slushing through muck and mire, aimlessly, dimly conscious of some high mission, not quite believable. And with that in his mind, it was too much to ask his body to assume heroism. Instead, he trudged along quietly, neither trim nor quite careless, his eyes turning, slowly from side to side, but, somehow, without much curiosity.

He stopped, then, to fish for a cigarette, and realized his last butt was already gone. "Wish I had a cigarette, at least," popped into his mind, something someone had said once, while lying down in a muddy hole watching the blood trickle out slowly. For a moment, the scene was crystal clear, then it faded back and was gone, and he turned on with a shrug; he'd been without smokes before, would be again. A thin, average-height youth, with something almost haunted in his eyes, lips tensed a trifle, lost without name or place or knowledge of why he was there.

But there was nothing to do but go on, and the hazy idea that he had to go on was fixed in his mind. Back there in that place, he'd felt it—had been feeling it grow until he could no longer resist, and had risen and come out into a strange world where no guns boomed ominously to suggest a coming drive, and where a clean, well-paved road led down through the early mist to this bridge that ran over a river, somewhere.

It was a clean, white bridge, and beyond it was the suggestion of some building, looming up quietly ahead. There was neither mud nor dust, no shell holes, no barbed wire, no men screaming out their last breaths, just beyond the reach of their comrades—like Tommy. The picture of Tommy out there on the wire, pleading to them to shoot him and get it over with, was the one sharply etched memory that was left. Tommy'd been there for hours, screaming between the roars of the guns and whine of the shells, begging them to finish it off for him; and they'd huddled back behind the bags, risking death at intervals in an attempt to center a rifle on him and grant his wish—uselessly; Death hadn't been ready for Tommy yet.

And then, it had been too much. Someone with them had laughed, gripping his head, and dropped his rifle to go out there, over the sandbags, and through the debris of shell holes and mud, running, not bravely, but hysterically and crazily to where Tommy was caught and dying too slowly. Twice fragments had hit him, and he'd staggered back to jump forward again. Tommy'd seen the running figure, and, somehow, Tommy'd straightened up a little in the snarl and managed to shake his head, yelling now for the runner to go back, swearing with oaths learned only at the right hand of Death. Somehow, the runner had made it, and groped down with pliers for the wire holding Tommy helpless there, just as a shell burst somewhere with a jar. Then Tommy'd slumped back, silent.

Beyond that, the picture vanished, and the boy on the bridge shook his head. He couldn't remember who'd been the crazy fool to run out then, nor what had happened to him; he'd probably been blown into small pieces—if he was lucky. Shells could do funny things. For all he knew, Tommy's would-be rescuer might have been himself. Why not? That had been a long time ago, from the time-sense that had gone on measuring out the passing days and years and was still a part of him, but between the incident and the moment when he'd stirred restlessly and climbed out into the morning mist, he had no pictures, no feeling even that there should be pictures. It fitted his mood that he should be dead. There were no angels around, but his religion had been the rather hazy feeling of a God somewhere who let a man go on after he shuffled off his flesh. Angels would have been nice, but not necessary to the thing. Somewhere in school, he'd been taught of Asgard and the Norse Valhalla, where the warriors came up over the bridge Bilfrost to enter Odin's halls and fight and eat and die and fight again.

Again he grimaced. Bunk! Under his feet was good cement, and the asphalt on the road wasn't exactly heavenly. Neither were the graceful autos that passed in increasing numbers, low and rounded in lines, and mercifully silent. This was some part of the same old crazy world, though he didn't know where, nor how he'd gotten there, nor what he'd been doing in all the time he could feel had passed. He didn't much care.

Ahead of him, another figure appeared, clad in khaki, also, but a khaki that had more green and less yellow in it. In mild curiosity he examined the trim uniform, wondering when they'd issued clothes like that—they looked like a cross between service uniform and civvies. Long pants, no leggings, a well-draped coat, and of all things, an open lapel and soft-collared shirt. Habit led his eyes to the gold bar on the shoulders, and his arm came up in a gesture that was almost pure, conditioned reflex, yet still not quite snappy.

The lieutenant returned it smoothly, started on past, and then slowed to stare in a puzzled frown, glancing from the uniform to the boyish face and back. "Where'd you get it?"

"France, sir. Where else? The ones we got here fitted."

"France? Mister, you're a da—" The lieutenant's eyes caught the boy's then, and he dropped his own, fumbling for a

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cigarette. "Sorry. You looked so— Anyway, none of my business. Smoke?"

"Thanks, sir." He drew in on the cigarette with a grateful relief from the gnawing little tension that had been in his muscles, saluted again, and went on toward the white building that loomed up closer now, and clearer as the sultry heat of the day began dispersing the fog. At least he knew for sure that this wasn't France—it could only be America. When you've been away long enough, you get to know the walk of a man on foreign land, and the lieutenant hadn't had it. Funny, he'd never expected to get back here, and now he couldn't tell how he'd done it.

Then the bridge came to an end, and he was facing a circular roadway around the building; he knew where he was for sure, now. Few buildings carry the individuality of the Lincoln Memorial, and there could be no mistaking it. Beyond it, in confirmation, was the spire of the Washington Monument, and between them, as he circled, he caught sight of the Reflecting Pool. He'd seen them on dozens of picture post cards, and there'd been the guide book an aunt had brought back from her trip to Washington. Well, he'd meant to see it sometime for himself, and now he was looking at it, wondering only faintly how he'd come to the capital.

He completed the half circle, and stood looking out over the Pool toward the Monument and on to where the dome of the Capitol showed in the now clear air over the trees on the Monument grounds, then swung back to face the statue of Lincoln, sitting calmly gazing out over it all, enshrined like the old Greek gods in their temples. There was no thrill, no lift of spirits in the boy's mind, but he stood there for long moments, feeling the calm peace and sure purpose of the masterpiece. And as he looked, the feeling of purpose and some call to duty began to flow through his mind again. There was a reason for his presence here, and it was up to him to find it. Feeling half silly, he brought his arm up in a smarter salute to the statue than the lieutenant had received, turned, and headed toward the city proper.

He was walking slightly more slowly, the stride of someone used to exhaustion and no longer capable of feeling fatigued or rested, as he came to the red light. This, he saw, was Fourteenth Street, and he'd been following New York Avenue for the last block; Pennsylvania Avenue, which had carried him past the White House, had vanished somewhere, and he had no desire to trace its windings. As he stood there, the light changed, and he started across, sticking to the general direction he'd been following for the last half hour. Already the streets were filling with people, and he could feel their occasional stares, but by now he'd learned the trick of turning to meet their eyes. Invariably, they dropped their gaze and went on, without looking back.

The girls had bothered him most, at first. He remembered faintly the girls who'd said goodby to them back home, and was aware more strongly of the time and changes since then. He'd blushed like a fool when he saw the first young woman walking along, her short skirt showing her legs, her sheer blouse concealing all too little of the lace and silken things she wore beneath. But there'd been a freshness and cleanness to her that left no doubts in his head. Now he was becoming used to the cosmetics, the red fingernails, the revealing feminine clothes, and the free, confident carriage. There was an ache inside him somewhere that the French hussies who'd come out to the doughboys had never brought there, a queer tingling pride in this country that could produce such girls. He caught himself reaching out with slightly trembling fingers to touch the arm of one of them, jerked it back, and blushed again, hot with the feeling of his own foolishness. A man who'd get fresh with these deserved shooting or worse.

Sloppy sentimentality, he told himself. What he needed was breakfast. Wonder if he could wangle a little white-bread toast and coffee with sugar? There'd been letters about that in the trenches, and of how fifteen pounds of substitutes had to be bought for one pound of good white flour. He shrugged and turned into a restaurant at Twelfth Street after jingling his pocket hastily to make sure he had the money. The counter was filled, and he ran his eyes over the booths, wondering whether to wait or take up one of them by himself.

It was then he saw the girl sitting alone, reading a newspaper, and the queer ache came over him again. She wasn't exactly beautiful, but, somehow, lovely, her brown hair falling softly to the shoulders, her face a trifle gaminish, with a dash of Irish around the mouth, and a smoothness of line that made what might have been thinness seem utterly feminine. You can't describe a girl like that, he thought, knowing it was sloppy and not caring; you just look at her and feel it.

She seemed to sense his gaze, for her eyes met his. That did it. How an impish provocativeness could be blended with naïve innocence and a trace of maternalism, he couldn't have told, but her eyes held all that, even as they registered faint distrust. He started forward, crimson again, but impelled by the craving for feminine words that he'd been feeling for the last hour.

"I . . . sorry if I'm rude—" Her eyes were still on his, and he stopped. He couldn't do it, even though she'd been the first one who hadn't jerked her glance away. He started to turn, just as she smiled, a half-amused,

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half-puckish lighting of her face. "Oh, darn it, miss, I don't want to be . . . but—"

"Why not sit down? I suppose I should, but I don't mind." She pushed the paper away from her, and motioned to the seat opposite. He slid in awkwardly, and she grinned in honest amusement that was less embarrassing than any attempt to cover it would have been. "You act as if you'd never seen a girl before, soldier."

"It's not quite that bad, miss. But—well, over there, things were different. We didn't see the nice ones, and the others—" He dropped it, and ordered his toast and coffee. "Seems funny, getting back to America. Over there in France, I thought I'd never make it."

"Over there in France? You were fighting the Nazis?" She'd finished her breakfast and was digging into her handbag. A cigarette came out and she lighted it casually while he stared. But no one else seemed to notice, and there were so many strange things that he decided to forget it.

"What Nazis? All I know is that we were supposed to be fighting the Kaiser, but after we got there, all I ever saw were a bunch of boys on the other side in different helmets. We were too busy fighting to be fighting anyone in particular, even when we called 'em 'Heinies.'"

Her eyes were wide now, and she shook her head, suspicion written large on her face. "Kaiser? Heinies? But that was twenty-five years ago; and you're no older than I am. My father was over there with them; he married mom after he came back."

The boy made no comment. Twenty-five years! Her paper was still lying open, and he glanced at it, to see her words confirmed. "July 3, 1942." And his world was built around 1918. This girl's father had returned from the World War to marry her mother.

They'd pulled him out of college in '17, put him in a camp for hasty instructions, run him across on a troopship, and then there'd been the long months of death and mud. There'd been the starving French girls, and Tommy, and— Then other men had come back, married, brought up children, and put them through college, while he felt that nothing had happened to him. Even the mud spots on his clothes seemed the same old familiar ones, and the stubble on his face was still a yellow down, hardly needing a razor. He was nibbling at the toast and tasting the coffee as he thought it over in his head, but he pushed them back. He had no need of them—there was something wrong with the idea of eating now, and only old habit had driven him to try it.

She was speaking again. "Yet, I guess I believe you—I don't know why. The way your eyes look—dad always had the same thing in his when he talked about the war. And your uniform doesn't look like a parade getup. There's something about you—as if I knew you, or something. How—"

"I don't know," he answered slowly. "I don't know anything—my own name, even, how I got here, where I'm going, what I'm to do. I can remember the whine of shells one minute, then something made me get up this morning and come out, looking for something I've got to do. I don't even know what a returned doughboy can do in peace time."

"It isn't exactly peace time." She looked at the clock, frowned, and turned back to him, holding out the paper. "I shouldn't believe you, but I do. And I'm supposed to be at work in ten minutes, yet I'm going to be late just to tell you what's been going on. I wonder why I'm not surprised, but I'm not."

It was much later when he sat back, nodding. Hitler, Mussolini, Japan—no longer an ally, but an enemy, ruthless and without principles. France, no longer a battleground for Democracy, but in the hands of the invaders. And this time they weren't merely Heinies, but something grimmer and uglier, Nazis who devoted themselves to the blood altar of a barbarian racial fanaticism.

"'To make the world safe for Democracy,'" he quoted softly. Funny, he'd really believed that, in spite of himself. He'd laughed at it among his cynical college friends, and yet all of them must have been swept up by it, with the old crusading spirit. It had been a bright vision, even in the mud of France, a hope for the world; and a few power-mad idiots had taken only twenty-five years to trample it down into the ground and begin all over again.

"Bitter?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, somehow I'm not. We were right, then, I think. If there'd been no need to make the world safe for Democracy, then all this would never have happened afterward. We just figured we could do it all in one swoop, and it seems to take more doing than that. I should have known; I was majoring in history before it began. No other major conflict was ever finished in five years, or fifty years. You have to keep fighting for your side until some day there isn't any other side, because you've conquered it a little at a time and the grandchildren of the men you fought believe the same as you do. Then there'll be something else to fight about. But the important thing is, that little by little things do get ahead that way. We had to fight the Revolutionary War to start Democracy, the Civil War to keep it, the World War to save the others who felt as we did and tried to extend it, and this war the same. It's like gold mining, you might say."

"I don't get it."

He didn't entirely himself. Principles are vague things to die for, and yet sometimes they

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were worth dying and killing for. Usually the direct action was easier than trying to understand clearly why you had to do it. "Well, the prospectors found themselves mines by working harder hunting for it, and keeping at it, believing that there was gold there if they'd work for it. They dug it out, and began thinking about bringing out their families, and then somebody jumped their claims with a gun in his hand. They had to fight him for it, and probably fight his kind more than once, fight out false claims in court, and maybe at last come through with it, bring out their families, and help build up one of our modern cities where others could live and work safely. If anything's worth having—mine, family, flag, country or Democracy—it's worth fighting for, and you'll have to fight for it."

"I never thought of it that way. But you've already fought once—and it didn't seem to do much good, did it?"

He grinned slowly, realizing that her question was not meant as an argument against his, but only a probe for his reaction. "It gave me the chance to fight again—maybe this way we can beat them some day and keep the gold; the other way, we never could. And this time, I'm going to enlist—that's probably what I felt I had to do all the time."

"And I'm going to be bawled out for being two hours late, but I don't care. . . . No, I'll pay my own check." She reached for it, but he had it in his hand already, and was groping in his pocket for the change that had rattled there.

It came out—seven francs and four centimes. There was nothing else, though he groped back again in frantic hope. There were only the eleven pieces, dated from 1904 to 1915, and all coin of France—a France that no longer had any real existence except in the mind of its still rebellious people. He stood there helplessly staring at them, his face reddening slowly, and puzzlement vying with the embarrassment. Even the coins he carried were the same coins that had been in his pocket in France the day that . . . that—

He almost had it when she pulled him back to the seat. "Easy, soldier. It's all right. I understand—or I seem to understand, at least. Here." She had her handbag open and was pushing a bill into his hand. He saw that it was about half the size of the bills he'd remembered, and that Lincoln's picture was still on the five-dollar note. And the memory that had almost come to him was gone again.

"But—"

"*Shh.* You can pay it back some day. Here, I'll take these as security." She was smiling at him, and the maternal part of her eyes was uppermost then as she picked the French coins out of his hand and stuck them into her pocketbook. "And here's my name and address, so you can return it. A soldier needs some money to carry him until pay day, you know. Besides, I don't have anyone in the service writing me, and this will give me a good excuse to ask you. You will keep it?"

For an instant he was afraid he was going to cry in front of her, but he managed to control most of it. "What else can I do, when you make it sound so natural? I— Oh, you know what I feel about it."

She smiled and nodded again. "I'm glad. Write often, and good luck!" Then he was paying the checks and buying cigarettes, while she went down the street away from him, her short skirt no longer something strange to him, but a part of the spirit of her. He asked the cashier for directions, and she gave them with eyes carefully away from his. Now to enlist, and quiet the strengthened urge to do his part again.

Out on the street, it seemed hard to realize that this was the capital of a nation—his nation—at war. Particularly, when he remembered that tomorrow was the Fourth of July, most patriotic of all the national holidays. Oh, there were children with their cap pistols already, and the posters everywhere advertising Defense Bonds, silence to keep secrets from the enemy, and similar things, but there was none of the blatant hysteria of the last war, as he remembered it. And yet, in the quietness with which everyone went about his business, he sensed a determination that was more solidly based than it had been in '17.

The newspapers, he saw, were filled with news, some good and some bad, from what he could tell, and there was bickering in Congress, and accusations of war profiteering, of "too little, too late," and other current cries. But those things had happened before, and this time there was more control than there had been. It was impossible for any large nation to agree on all details, useless to hope that some short-sighted people would not try to turn the general trouble into a lever to use for their own selfish purpose. Those things were a part of war, as much as the fighting. But this was a healthy spirit around him, a calmer, more determined spirit. Before, in America there had been the cries and the shoutings, the loud oratory, and disordered scrambling that had been in severe contrast to the actual front-line spirit. This was no longer a people trying to convince themselves that they should fight for a principle, but a people who knew they had to, just as the soldiers at the front must know. He pushed on toward the recruiting office, more at ease than he'd been since he'd come out of the place in the morning. This would be a better war to fight in.

There were a few men already there, sitting in chairs and waiting their turn. They were ordinary enough young men, mostly, though one oldster was

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vehemently protesting his ability, and there was a small amount of good-natured kidding going on. The man on his right turned to say something, caught his glance and settled back quietly. Something about him was different; their looks weren't ones of fear, but of minding their own business, something like the expression of a soldier who'd started to address another familiarly and then caught the insignia of a major just in time to check it.

They came to him in time, with the inevitable papers, that were different but strongly familiar. At least, there was less of the hurried, impersonal treatment here than there had been in the draft center the last time; probably some of the prejudice in favor of enlistment still lasted, though he'd learned that the matter was no test as to a man's courage at the front. He filled in as he came to the questions, pulling his answers out of the air, conscious that a lot of them were probably the correct ones, but sure of none. He stated his age minus the lapse of twenty-five years, and no questions were raised, nor was the matter of his outmoded uniform brought up. Once a new man came into the office and stared for a second before turning on, but he seemed under a blanket protection. Wearing even a last-war uniform should have been a matter for suspicion in an enlistee, but there seemed to be none.

"You forgot to put down your name," he was told. Name? He had none. But his eye fell on the belt of a uniform at the other end of the room, and he wrote down "Sam Brown" quietly. "Middle name?"

"None."

"O. K., might as well get your medical over with. In there."

He went in, behind two others who were discussing their surprise at the prompt medicals; they'd expected to have to wait for notice, as in the case of draftees. He was free from expectation or curiosity, his mind almost empty as he waited his turn.

Finally one of the doctors indicated him. "Sam Brown, next. Dr. Feldman, take this one."

Feldman took him in tow, into a place where another man was dressing. "Strip." And still there was no comment on his uniform, though he was surprised himself to see the gashed underclothes, stained and muddy. A bath and fresh clothes would have come in handy.

"Step up here; stand straight. Good. Weight, one hundred forty-three; height, five feet nine and one-half inches. Bend over." It went on through the old routine, and finally the strap was wrapped around his arm for blood pressure, pumped up, and Dr. Feldman looked at the gauge which held no meaning for him. "Systolic . . . umm. Wait a minute."

The medico brought out a stethoscope, listened carefully, moved it, and listened again. "Just a minute. Dr. Palz, will you come here?" And again it was repeated, this time by Palz. Feldman looked on carefully, "Well?"

Palz nodded. "If you mean—then I do get the same results. Hm-m-m. All right, young man, if you'll jump from one leg to another twenty times— Good." And it all began for the third time, now with muttered consultations going on between the two doctors. "We're probably both crazy, Dr. Feldman, but—"

"Yeah." Feldman rubbed his hands against his side. "Yeah. When in doubt— I'm sorry, Mr. Brown, but I'm afraid you won't do. You can dress now."

The boy looked slowly from one to the other, and he drew nothing from their incredulous expressions. He'd been sure there would be no trouble that way—he'd passed the draft physicals with an A-1 rating, and while the fighting at the front had been tough, surely it hadn't softened him—unless there had been something in the years between that he couldn't remember.

"Soldier's heart?" he hazarded, remembering talk of men whose hearts raced, weakened, and failed at the first real sign of exercise. "You mean my heart's too fast?"

"Hardly too fast—no." Feldman looked at him thoughtfully and almost fearfully. "If I had time of my own, I'd— You can leave by that door."

This was no answer. "Doctor, what's the reason, then? Oh, I gather it's my heart, but what's wrong with it?"

Again Feldman studied him before answering. "Don't you know?"

"No. I wouldn't ask if I did."

"Then feel your own pulse, man. That's all."

He stumbled out, wondering, into one of the little parks that seemed to be all over the capital, drawing slowly at a cigarette. He wasn't sure he wanted to try it—anything that had such a reaction on men who were familiar with all kinds of disorders must be pretty bad. But as he finished the cigarette, he mashed it out under his heel and put his finger to his pulse.

There was none!

Nor was there a sign of heartbeat when he held his hand there; the artery under his neck gave the same answer. Five times he tried it. No heartbeat. Even when he jumped from the bench and ran wildly through the park and down the street to another, he could detect no faintest sign of a pulse anywhere. Yet he was panting, and he had the feeling of hot blood coursing through him and sweat pouring off. He pressed his hand under his armpit and drew it away—dry! His skin showed no slightest sign of moisture anywhere, though the day was as hot and sticky as any he'd known—typical Washington summer weather he'd gathered from various uncomplimentary remarks.

Curiously, there was no excite-

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ment in him. His brain should have been turning frantically from point to point for some rational explanation, but he sought none. Instead, he got up from the bench and went up Eleventh Street with a slow, even stride, across E Street, through the crowds at F, and beyond G toward H, his only thought being the counting off of the blocks as they came. Then a little novelty shop caught his eye, and he went in.

"Do you have a small mirror—anything at all, just something cheap?"

The woman nodded and handed across a small square of glass. "Ten cents," she said, and dropped her eyes hastily to the coin as he looked at her.

He stuck it in his pocket and went out onto Eleventh again, carefully aware that the heat and walking were making him breathe heavily; he was conscious of the fairly rapid rise and fall of his chest, of the slightly choking feeling that comes from too much humidity in the air. He held the mirror up to his mouth, drew it back, and inspected it before tossing it away.

Its work was done. There was no condensed moisture on it from his breath. He'd expected it, and again there was the curious lack of emotional response. Quite calmly he faced the fact that by two standard tests he was dead. But it was a senseless paradox of death that seemed to breathe but didn't—the cigarette smoke eddied slowly from his mouth as he watched, but the mirror showed no sign of moisture. To hell with it; at worse, it was highly vital death.

No wonder they'd turned him down, though; the miracle was that they hadn't gone crazy, though he supposed it would take a lot to do that to a doctor—or would it? Weren't they used to certain absolute facts, such as that a living man automatically included a beating heart, and when confronted with a violation of their fundamental law, wouldn't it hit them harder? He didn't know.

And, perversely, the feeling that he had been called forth for some job that needed doing was

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stronger than ever. And the people about him were suddenly strangers, walking in a strange world. That feeling passed, and he felt normal again, except for the urge to do something, and the knowledge that he was seemingly unable to find it.

One of the boxes along the street that were giving out music and speeches—"radios," apparently, since the shop was advertising the things under that name—broke off its news report of some action taking place in the Pacific, and began one of the announcements he'd heard several times already. "Men, Uncle Sam needs your help. If you're a skilled worker—" There was more of it, but he stopped listening, turning it over in his mind.

His skill was limited. Before the war, he'd been an unlicked cub of a kid, filled with a kid's idle dreams and hazy desires to do something, but unsure of what. He hadn't even peddled papers; and they'd packed him off to college to a thoroughly impractical education at sixteen. He remembered vague discussions of pseudo-politics with other boys there, something about the United States being able to stay out of all foreign affairs; he'd been for it, as he remembered. Tommy hadn't—that's where he'd met Tommy, and they'd met again over there. Tommy'd enlisted, but he'd been too full of the school twaddle to free his mind from it at first, and he'd been drafted before he could reorient himself. An incomplete major in history, a vague feeling that he'd sometime write a book on the "Dynamics of History," and school politics hardly constituted skills.

His thoughts had been too much in his head for him to notice where he was going or the people around him, but now a vague awareness of something unusual made him look forward quickly. One of the crowd ahead was staring at him, with a sickly, whitish-green caste to his skin that made him stand out like a ghost at a wedding. As the boy watched, the man's knees were trembling visibly, and he stood, half turned, apparently rooted to the spot.

Still the soldier's feet moved forward toward the man directly in his path, and sudden fright seemed to galvanize the frozen expression into a grimace of the purest possible fear.

"Gott, nein! Gott Bewahre, so mach' ich nie wieder! Hinweg, um Gottes willen! No, back—back! I repent, I surrender, but back! Oh, *du lieber Gott, schuldig kenn' ich mich—"* German and English spilled out in a quavering admission of treachery and deceit, both carrying an accent, as if the groveling creature had grown up in both and learned neither perfectly.

The bulging eyes were centered squarely on the boy now, and he began to realize that whatever frightened the man was something about himself, but his feet carried him remorselessly forward without direction from his mind. Fear seemed suddenly to pass its ultimate pinnacle, and a convulsive flash of movement brought the man to his feet and sent him off in a wild bound, unmindful that it carried him directly into the arms of an approaching policeman. For a moment the officer stepped backward, and then as the meaning of the babbled words hit him, he pinned the other firmly and looked over the crowd that had collected.

"Anyone see what got into this damned spy here?"

The boy started backward, but none were looking at him accusingly, as he'd expected, save for the frozen eyes of the self-confessed German agent, and they shook their heads, denying any knowledge of the reasons behind the peculiar actions of the captive. The officer shrugged and turned toward the call box on the corner.

"Darned funny. He acts as if he'd seen Old Nick himself. All right, break it up, we'll take care of this guy!"

He looked around again at the dispersing crowd, but no eyes were on him, and their curiosity was uncentered. Whatever the German had seen was unrevealed to the rest of them. He went up the street, and there was no more attention paid to him than before. Why?

The question went without answer. Ordinarily, he might have put it down to coincidence and dropped it from his mind, but too many strange things had been forced upon him at once, and it seemed that there must be some connection. The German had looked at him and seen—what? Whatever it was, it obviously had been neither pretty nor normal, unless there was some incident between them in the buried years of which he had no memory. And such stark fear seemed hardly capable of being inspired by anything even as nearly human as he seemed to be.

Having no answer to the riddle, he dropped it as he struck New York Avenue, and turned toward Twelfth, that being the only place in the city with any associations in his mind. He hardly expected to find—uh, Anne—there, and he was right in that. But he went in out of some of the heat and sat down in a booth. "Beer."

It came out, cold and amber clear, and his eyes lighted faintly. Whether there was blood in his veins or a heart to pump it, at least the beer slid down smoothly and its taste was unchanged. He had no hunger, no faintest desire for food, which was another abnormality, and the familiarity of the unchanged taste of the liquid was like the presence of an old friend. Three more pennies went for a copy of a newspaper, picked at random, and he glanced over the headlines, mostly without meaning. Some of the stories helped a little to clarify his hazy notion of the world of 1942, though. He was more interested in the com-

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paratively few appeals to the patriotism of the readers; he chuckled wryly at the idea of giving his blood to the Red Cross. But the general idea was far from humorous; if his interpretation of the plasma bank was correct, it would have been a godsend twenty-five years before. He'd seen them lying on the stretchers, white and deathly still, with spilled blood on all sides of them and none available to save them. Now, it seemed, blood from civilians could keep the life going in men three thousand miles or more away. And he couldn't help, even in that.

Somehow, he wanted desperately to help. And his inability only made the need to do so the greater in his mind. They weren't blazoning frantic appeals from the rooftops this time, but the few small advertisements he saw reached out as the wildly painted signs had never done. Then, he'd been a boy, untempered and uncertain about such abstractions as the good of patriotism. The dragging months in France had cured it, had hardened him into a man, and burned a sense of responsibility into him. It seemed that a man picked up an obligation to a country that gave him the right to fight and—well, why not finish the thought?—and die for it.

But would beer sit well in a dead man's stomach? It didn't matter. He turned back through the paper idly, glancing over the sports items, which meant nothing to him, noticed that movie advertisements were still in superlatives, though there was casual mention to "talkies," which must mean the experiments with sight and sound had been perfected, and skipped the local stuff. The cartoon on the editorial page meant no more to him than the sports cartoon, and he swept over the puerile-sounding editorial, then to the column beside it; there his eyes stuck.

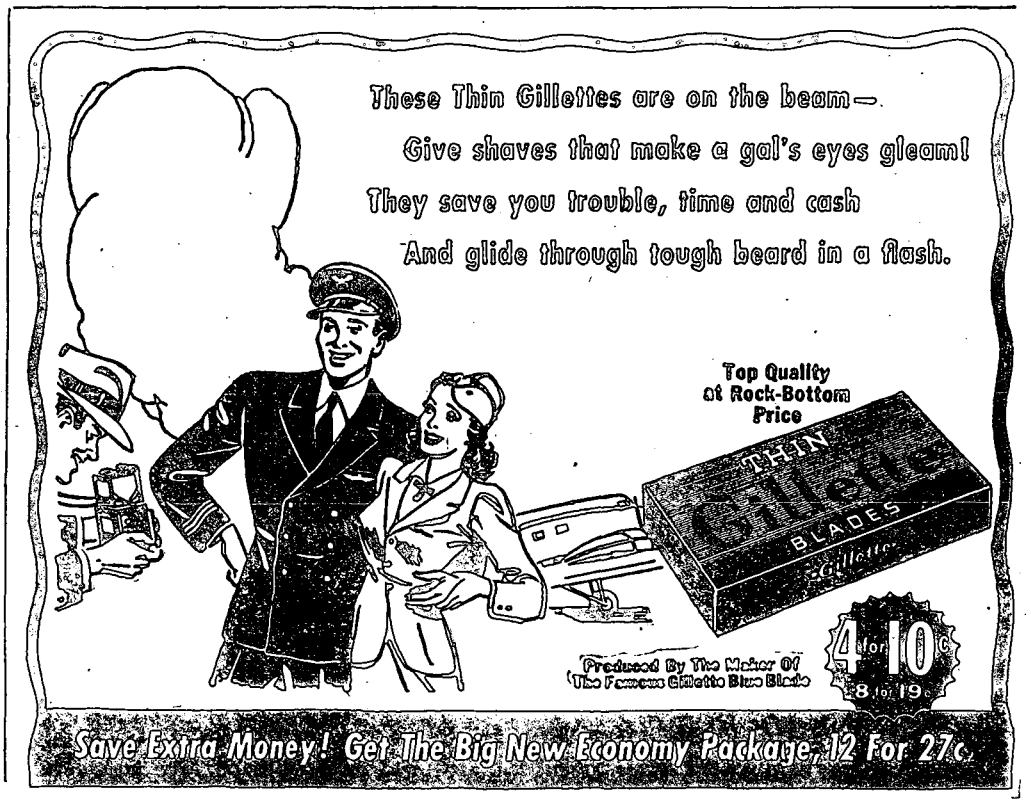
The arguments were old; variants of them had been used by a few papers in the last war. Nothing treasonable, of course; the old line of "we agree with you, only we're more patriotic, but . . . Can we trust our allies? Stab Russia when you can before she gets out of hand! Keep the armies at home to defend our own shores, instead of out there fighting for England. The Japs have already got India where they want her, let's retreat and hold Hawaii!" All the appeals to the festering little fears and hatreds of a great mass of the people were there, to stir up the readers, to make them doubt, and to hinder any forthright offensive. He'd been swayed by those same arguments once, and because of that, and because he'd seen their falsity as he mingled with the men of other nations and saw the grim facts at the front, his swearing was none too gentle as he read through it. Better the German agent than the man—managing editor, he saw by the masthead—who'd write such rot in the guise of patriotism while better men were dying for it, without time to talk of the love of right or country. Damned slimy skunk!

Why or what he hoped to accomplish, he couldn't have told, but anger swelled up in him as he paid his check and moved out into the street and toward the nearby address he'd noted carefully. He was a little ashamed of his anger, and then ashamed of his shame; anger on that subject was justifiable, and if it did no good, it could at least do no harm.

He found the editorial rooms without trouble, and the girl who stood guard outside only looked up once, then went on about her work, raising no objections as he pushed through the door and into the inner office; such minor miracles no longer caught more than a passing notice from him.

The editor threw a quick glance up and back to the work he was doing. "Well? How'd you get in here, and what do you want?"

Anger was still hot in him as he held out the column. "I'd like to make a complete fool of myself by pushing your face in.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I should do it, because I don't have the average man's reasons for not doing it, and it's a strong temptation. Man, do you realize what ideas you're trying to put into your readers' minds? Doesn't the responsibility of your job mean anything to you?"

"It means a great deal, young man." The answer seemed sincere enough, surprisingly, though it was hard to tell while the other kept his eyes down. "It means enough that if you and a dozen others who've threatened me were to come up here regularly to push my face in, as you put it, I'd still do all I could to keep us from going down the little end of the horn. We did it before, and—"

"Bunk! If you mean to tell me you believe in this unmitigated, treasonous rot—" For a breathing space he paused, and then the words inside him poured out. He couldn't have told afterward just what he'd said, though it had seemed important at the time; partly, he knew, it was an appeal to logic, mostly to emotions, but the words came to his lips almost automatically, while the editor sat quietly, face relaxed after the first flush of anger, slowly raising his eyes. Finally the words were drained from him completely, and still the other made no answer. What was the use? He turned with a half shrug back out of the office and down the street.

But he was feeling more cheerful, somehow. The release of his emotions had been better for him than keeping them to himself, at least, and he was no worse off. With new determination he set off toward an agency on E Street; the small notice he'd seen had indicated they might be able to help him in locating the work he must do. His heart—or whatever served him—was lighter as he headed down Ninth, whistling faintly.

Night found him again in front of the restaurant on Twelfth Street. He stood there, much as he had been on the bridge in the morning, though the gas mask was in some ash can, and the rucksack had followed it—the little it held was useless to him. But where he had merely felt empty and lost on the bridge, his feeling now was one of having been emptied—not only emptiness, but the emptiness which follows fullness.

The cigarette dangled from his lips and finally dropped out. He watched the door, seeing the people come in and go out, and could feel himself apart from them—a useless, wasted part of the world. The afternoon had taught him the last meaning of futility. At the agency, they'd been as helpful as they could, but there was nothing for him; he had no skill beyond soldiering, and that one skill "lodged in him useless, though his soul more bent to serve therewith—" Milton, he remembered; but Milton had his work still to do when he wrote that sonnet.

And afterward, tramping the streets, looking everywhere in the faint hope that he could at least replace someone who would be of more use, he'd found that a man out of his true time has no place. But there was no room for bitterness, or even for more than the merest surface stirring of thought. He stood there, watching, and it was later still when he realized that he'd been hoping to catch a glimpse of Anne.

Once he started inside, but he had no need of food, and the beer that would have been welcome could only come out of money which he no longer had a right to use.

Finally, he turned slowly, with a last look down the street, and began moving down New York Avenue toward no destination in particular. Behind him was the sound of men's feet, the brusque stamping of workmen on their way to their homes, and the clicking of high, feminine heels. He heard them all objectively, as if he could no longer connect them with people, or the people with himself, but only noises coming through a thick gray mist.

For seconds, one set of foot sounds had been near him, and now it was beside him. He slowed, without looking around, to let the owner of the feet go on, but the sounds slowed also, and he finally turned.

She was smiling, and the first warmth of the evening came into his spirits. "About time, soldier," she greeted him. "I had a hunch you might return there, but you were already going away when I spotted you. Were you look—"

"Looking for you? Yes. Though I had no right to be."

"*Sh-h*, soldier. If I could look for you, hadn't you the right to do the same for me?" Her arm went through his possessively, and in spite of himself, unnamed and painfully wonderful things passed through him; she was scarcely shorter than he in her high heels, yet she had the art of making him feel tall and strong and protective—even when it was she who did the protecting. "Did the day go so badly with you?"

He disregarded the last question, choosing to answer the first. "You were looking for me out of pity—you knew what would happen. And I . . . well, I was looking for you to get that pity, I suppose. No man has the right to go hunting for that."

"You weren't; I know that. You'd never turn to a woman for pity, soldier, but only because there are times when a man needs to talk to a girl. But I asked how the day went—and you haven't answered."

He told her of the recruiting station—though not the reason for the rejection—his flare-up at the newspaper, and the agency; the other places he mentioned without bothering to list. And her eyes were troubled as she listened, but there was neither

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scorn nor pity in them, and when he had finished, she made no immediate comment. For that he was grateful. Sometimes a man needs a woman's silent presence more than any words she can give him. They'd swung off New York Avenue, and up one of the numbered streets while he talked, and now she turned him, again, into a lettered street, down a block, and finally stopped.

"Home." The house was one of the innumerable brownstone buildings scattered over the city, but better kept than most. She indicated a great curved window on the first floor. "I've got an apartment there. It isn't as fancy as living in an apartment hotel, but it's comfortable, and I can do as I please. Come on up with me and I'll have supper ready shortly."

With the best of intentions to refuse, he found himself following her up the few steps and into the place. There, at the door, he stopped, conscious of his dirty clothing, the heavy, worn shoes, and the appearance he presented in general. He had no business in the room he saw in front of him, with its graceful furnishings that managed to suggest comfort and hominess without any loss of fineness of line or richness of appointments. She smiled quizzically at his expression, throwing her bag and paper carelessly onto a chair.

"In with you, Mr. X. I'm not holding this door open another minute."

And again he was unable to disobey her as she pushed him down onto a sofa, pulled an apron off a rack, and went out into the little kitchenette to begin supper. He relaxed back on the seat after the first minute, and watched as she moved about, soaking in the grace and motions of her body as he might have basked in sunlight after sleeping in a cold cellar. Apparently the meal was almost entirely prepared, already; she must have gone out after him deliberately either on a hunch or a wild chance. He wondered which.

"Hungry?" she asked as she piled the last dish on the table and indicated his chair.

He took it. "Not very. I—" Why go on pretending? She'd earned the truth, or at least a part of it. "I suspect I don't have any need to eat. I've managed to go all day without anything, and I'm still not hungry. Smells good, though."

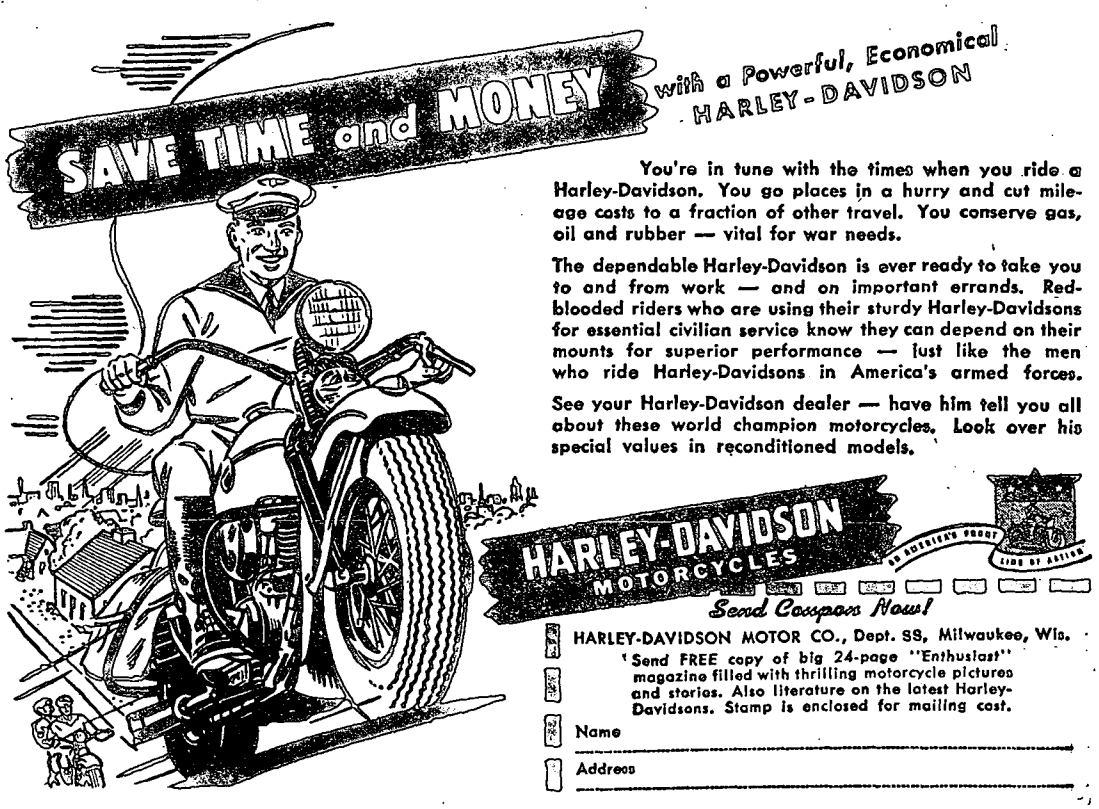
"Then eat it," she ordered. "There's no fun in cooking unless someone else is around to enjoy it."

To his surprise he found that there was still a savor to food, and while he still felt no need of it, the sensation of eating was as enjoyable as ever. What would a ghost do with food? Or why should a living man do without the beat of his heart? Neither life nor death would serve as a single answer to the conflicting facts of his existence, just as there was no work for him among the living, nor rest among the dead.

Her voice broke in on his thoughts. "You don't need to breathe, either, do you, soldier? You forget to whenever you're thinking about something else."

There was no fear or surprise in her face as he looked up sharply. And as he glanced back at himself, he noticed his breath begin with a little jerk and then go on smoothly. He pushed the food aside and held his wrist out to her.

She touched it for a few seconds, and nodded slowly; the whitening of her face was so slight that he sensed rather than saw it, but her voice was still perfectly calm. "I thought so. I noticed the breathing this morning, but didn't realize I'd done so until after I'd left you—Do you know 'In Flanders Field'? No, of course not."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Perhaps no war poem has ever come so close to perfection as that one, and she recited it well. ". . . We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset's glow; loved and were loved, and now we lie in Flanders Field. . . . If ye break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep, though poppies grow —" But the living had broken no faith here; over there, perhaps. They had taken up the quarrel with the foe—not the literal foe of men and arms, but the truer one of hatred and barbaric ideologies—and from what he had seen, none who might lie in Flanders Field could begrudge them their holding of the torch. He seemed to be breaking faith, but that not willingly.

He shrugged off the overlaid feeling of the poem on his own mood, and stood up. "I can't bother you any more, Anne. You know as much about me as I do, and you can see how hopeless I am. Here . . . I spent part of it, but here's what's left. I got it under false pretenses, and I'll probably never pay the rest back, but I have no need for this."

Her eyes were hurt, and then proud. "You need it more now, and I don't need it at all. Father has a home and money, if I want them; and my own work pays more than I can use. Call it a debt that my generation owes yours, and let me pay it. You'll need a room, unless you want to stay here. No, I meant that, soldier, but not as it sounds. There's a room here I never use, and I can trust you. Which will it be?"

"A room, I guess, if I can find one in this overcrowded city."

"There's one up the street somewhere; a friend of mine was telling me about it at work today. I've got the address in my other pocketbook, if you'll wait a half minute." She started back, then stopped at the door. "Darn, I took it out of the bag, now that I remember. No telling where I put it or how long you'll have to wait now. Why don't you look at the paper while I'm hunting? Something on page 12 may interest you, I think."

He picked it up and began to open it, but as she slipped back out of sight, he tossed it aside and did what he knew he must. The rug muffled his footsteps as he dropped the money on the table and passed to the door, which opened silently and closed without a creak. Outside and down the street, he heard her voice raised, and a click of heels on the steps, but he was running then with every ounce of energy in his legs, around a corner, through an alley, and in zigzag fashion until she couldn't possibly trail him. The knowledge that she had tried to was oddly comforting, though.

It hadn't been pity, he knew, nor charity, nor any of the other blind and selfish emotions men use to inflate their own egos at the expense of others less fortunate. None of them would have made her accept and trust him or bear the knowledge of what sort of creature he was without flinching and drawing away from him. That fact only made it the more necessary that he should leave.

He was a failure. How much of a failure, he could only guess as his feet carried him steadily onward through the streets, to Constitution Avenue and beyond. Lincoln Memorial was before him, but he avoided the statue, and was back on the bridge, again partially wrapped in a mist from the river that put halos around its lights. He was to have been a miracle and a symbol, somehow, and instead he was returning to the place from which he came, useless in a world where even the average ordinary failures could serve.

The bridge was more than a quarter of a mile in length, and his feet carried him along slowly, but it was behind him at last, and he was following a curving roadway that led up a hill. Just where he was going he did not know. That morning, beyond the driving need to come out, he had been aware of nothing. All he knew was that he had come from a place and was going back to it, carried by feet that drew him onward surely if slowly.

Yet he was reluctant to return. He halted to smoke and try to think, off the road a ways. In the sky, a premature skyrocket flashed up in a zooming arc from somewhere in the city, and he ducked with an instinctive desire to hole up from anything that whined in the sky above him. Then he lay there, smoking and feeling; it could hardly be called thinking. And his emotions were a jumble of dark moods and bluely warm thoughts of the one part of the city that was other than an impersonal goal behind him.

It might have been minutes or hours later when he reached again for a smoke and drew out the last one in the package. But it was time to go on, and there was no sense in turning back. Above him, bright stars dappled the sky, and behind him the lights gleamed through the fog that snuggled against the ground and swirled about his feet. Before him, the road led somewhere.

It ended before his feet stopped and he looked about him to see the outlines of something that might have been a shrine or an amphitheater. Up there a soldier was pacing up and down in rigid military precision, and as he watched, another came forward and went through the high ritual of changing guards. Forward to the end of the stone platform, turn, backward to a stone structure. That caught his eye then, and he studied the eleven-foot object idly, noting the simple beauty of the work and the three figures adorning it. But his feet were moving again, carrying him forward. This was the place, and there was but one thing left to do.

The force of the grip on his shoulder nearly threw him from his feet, and he whirled to see

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her again beside him, panting hotly, her left fist clenched tightly and her right one still digging into the flesh of his arm.

"Thank God!" It was more than an exclamation as she whispered it through her teeth. "Didn't you hear me shouting? I called, but you were going on, and I thought I wouldn't make it . . . only somehow I did! Soldier, you can't go there! Wait!"

He was dull with the wonder of it, and the fierce, hot, foolish hope that flamed up in him as he gripped her and pulled her around before him. "How'd you find me, Anne? How could you trail me the way I went?"

She stopped to catch some of her breath, and she was limp and trembling from running as she held onto him. "I didn't; I knew better than to try. But I knew where you were going—the only place you could go. So I came after you. You should have waited—it would have been so much easier."

The flame was dying out of him, and he shook his head. "It's no use. You shouldn't have come, you know."

"I don't know, soldier. Do you think I'd have come after you to see you go there, unless there was some hope I could keep you from it? That's why I took so long, telephoning, waiting, arguing, and finally driving out here, afraid to find you already gone, but just praying I wouldn't." She was pulling him back now, into one of the shadows, and out of it again, to where a half-hidden figure was standing. "Father fixed it for me to see him finally and I forced him to come with me."

The figure was moving toward them now, and the boy could make out four stars on the shoulders of the uniform. Anne's father must be somebody, he thought, to arrange an interview at such an hour; and Anne herself had performed no small miracle in bringing a general out here on a crazy mission she couldn't have explained fully.

"Well, young man!" There was a bluff heartiness to the general's voice that didn't entirely cover other emotions. "This young lady tells me you're looking for work to help your country again, and she tells it so well I'm out of my bed and out here to see you. If her story hadn't been so completely insane, I'd have thought she was. I am myself, or I wouldn't be here. Let's have a look at you, over here in the light from my headlights."

He stared for long minutes, silently, nodding faintly to himself, while the younger man could feel his flesh crawl with doubt of the outcome. Finally the general turned away, and he could hear Anne's breath catch.

"Well?" she asked, and for the first time her voice quavered.

The older man shook himself, and his eyes were on neither of them, but directed outward toward the horizon. "For some reason, I believe it. I wondered, riding here, when I was foolish enough to imagine, what it would feel like if I found you were correct, Miss Bowman. I told myself I'd be afraid, incredulous and perhaps half mad. Now I find I'm none of those things. If God or whatever other Power rules in this has arranged it as it seems to be, I guess those of us who discover it will be protected by His will. All I can feel is something I've felt

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when I saw what men can do in battle. . . . My God, what a magnificent propaganda story; and what a pity nobody'd ever believe it. Young man, do you know what that monument is that you were looking at?"

He looked back at it. "No, sir."

"That's the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. He was one of those who fell in France without any trace to indicate who he was. He was selected and brought back here in 1921, and ten years later they erected that in his honor—or, rather, in honor to all those who fell over there without names that could be honored personally. That monument stands as a symbol of our obligation to the men whose efforts brought us victory before. And you came out of there." The general stopped then, looking for a response, but there was none, and he continued: "You don't owe your nation anything, son; it owes you."

"So I'm a ghost, then." He turned it over in his head, but already it was as if he'd received the knowledge long ago. "Or am I the personalization of the thoughts of all the people who've been aware of me—or even a little of each? I'm apparently physical enough—I seem to weigh as much as I did before. I can do anything a living man can, phantom or not. No, sir, the dead can never have claims on the living, except to ask them to carry on. And if I'm returned, it's because there is something I can do. I want to do it—you've honored me, or those I represent, long enough; now you're in the same old struggle, and it's my turn to serve again. If you can help me find something, that's all the honor I—or those others—can ask."

"But, if I made you a soldier in the present army, would it be fair for you to take up arms against the. . . . the living, if you can carry arms and still fight? Or if we only see you by some trick of illusion that fools even yourself, could you help in a purely physical army?"

He thought it over slowly, silently accepting a smoke from the other; to him, the cigarette answered the last—if it were illusion, such an illusion might kill as easily as consume beer or blow smoke from its mouth. But, could the dead be killed again—if he belonged truly to the dead? And if they could not, then surely he had no right to injure those who could not harm him. "Sorry, sir. It was good of you to come out here, but since you've shown me there's nothing I can do—" He began a salute, only to check it as his eyes rested again on the guard pacing back and forth up there.

"Those guards! They're living soldiers, and you could use them in combat. Then, why can't I do their work—there'd be no need to kill in that? And the men— How many? Two-hour shifts on with four off, or four hours on and eight off were usual guard hours, with the next day free. The six men I replaced could be used far better than I could as an individual. I have no need of food or sleep or rest; of that I'm sure. Why shouldn't I take that on a full-day, full-week shift, sir?"

"Unthinkable. What's the purpose of having a guard of honor when the dead do their own guarding?"

"Do you think the dead want that guard, sir, when their country needs men? Isn't it only necessary because civilian morale requires that the customs—most of them—of peace time be maintained?"

"No." The general's voice ended all argument. "No, son, I can't see it. And I'm not going to look at you while you talk to make sure you don't convince me. . . . That wasn't the work you were cut out for; it would have been far easier to let six who might die of wounds or infection live. And I can think of no more futile work than standing guard twenty-four hours a day over a tomb that we have reason to feel may now be empty, however necessary for morale."

"But, sir—"

The general smiled, but kept his eyes averted. "No. Ten minutes ago, I'd have defied any proof that the dead could walk; I came only to humor the whim of the daughter of a very close friend and because I felt the ride might do me good. Now, just looking at you, I'm taking it for granted that that sarcophagus is empty. That's why I won't look at you, and why I'm willing to let Miss Bowman tell you her idea."

He looked questioningly at the girl, who held out a paper, opened in the middle. "I wanted to show you that, soldier, but you ran off first. I knew, after what you'd told me, that it was the answer. But I knew you'd never listen to me alone."

He took it from her, noting it was a later edition of the same paper he'd bought that afternoon, opened to the editorial page where the same cartoon and editorial struck his eye. But the column between was different, and set in heavy-leaded type. It was titled quite simply, "APOLOGY!" and his eyes caught the first words and led him on.

To the readers of this paper and to a certain energetic young man who broke into this office to "push my face in" I want to apologize. I don't know who he was, nor do I care; I couldn't describe him to you, beyond the fact that he appeared to be a soldier in a rather sloppy uniform. But, whoever he was, I'm grateful to him.

He told me with complete candor that I was a fool. I agree. I have been a fool. I've been writing here for the last months as only a paid mouthpiece of the enemy should write, though in my own biased way I thought I was serving my country. I wasn't. The ideas could serve no one save the enemy.

So, after three hours of careful thought, my opinion is now that the decent readers of this paper should know, and probably do know, that all

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I've written has been lies—sheer, stupid lies. We're in no danger from England, or Russia, or any other ally who helps us in this war. We're in danger only from the knaves and fools who fill our minds with defeatism and the filth of which I have been as guilty as any. This probably means I'll lose my job, and you'll see another name here in later editions.

Why? Because, if you see the truth, you'll know who your real enemies are, and they don't want that. Because some people would rather cling to their own interests, would rather watch this nation perish, than give up one iota of their stupidity or their profits.

There have been too many lies to list here; it were better to refer you to the back columns I've written and tell you simply that the men who repeat them are your enemies. There is no truth in them, only plausibility and cheap emotional trickery. But, one I must point out while I still can. You've heard us say, "If you do thus and so, can you face the soldiers when they return again?" and it made a strong emotional appeal for every cheap purpose we were furthering. Now, I refer you to a well-known poem, of which I quote the last lines only:

"If you fail us who die, we shall
not sleep,
Though poppies grow in Flanders Field."

You know the source, surely. Well, we—this newspaper and myself—have failed those dead, and the dead of this war, most grievously. For that no apology is enough, but for the little good it may do, I apologize.

He was silent as he finished it. He'd been so sure he'd failed; he'd said nothing new, surely, that hadn't been said before. Yet, this was the result.

"You see?" the general broke in on his thoughts. "However you do it—by your eyes, or some driving force we lack, you walk around in a sort of aura that makes others believe pretty much what you want them to. My own present belief in you, Anne Bowman's faith—don't they suggest a better job than guarding an empty tomb?"

He nodded slowly, the idea still too new, and Anne picked up. "I'd read this before, and wondered about it; everyone was discussing it, and I couldn't be sure at first, but I suspected you. Then when you told me of seeing the editor, I knew. But you ran off before I could tell you; like a fool, I guess, I was going to surprise you later instead of telling you at once."

He looked slowly from one to the other, still only half believing. "You mean—"

"Nothing else," the general agreed. "You found your own job, because you were meant for it, apparently, only you were too blinded by desire for direct action to realize it. There are still plenty of people in this world of ours who are fighting us from within. Some of them do it deliberately—nothing much you can do about that, I suppose; but the real trouble comes from the sincere men who are blinded by prejudices against which none of our arguments or propaganda can make headway. You'll be a godsend to us, son, if you'll report to me in the morning. We'll give you some official but meaningless commission and let you follow your own impulses, unless you want to take suggestions. Well?"

It was obvious, of course; it should have been obvious from the time he'd first noticed the protection he'd seemed to be under; the willingness of Anne to believe him. Some glamyr surrounded him, and he wasn't sure but what it worked only on those who were for the same things he wanted—there'd been the German, who'd seen him differently. Maybe, he thought, the general was wrong about his being able to do nothing to the deliberately treasonous, judging by that. He grinned and nodded.

"In the morning, sir. And—did the writer get fired? Um-m-m. Then, perhaps, sir, I know where my first duty will lie." His hand came up in brisk salute, and the officer returned it before starting toward the car door.

"In the morning then, and do as you like. Coming back with me, Miss Bowman?"

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She shook her head. "I think not, thank you. I haven't had a good walk in ages, and it'll do me good."

The lights of the car swung and headed back, leaving them alone in the shadows near the Tomb. He stood awkwardly looking at her, shaking his head slowly, and she was laughing softly at his expression.

"I guessed, soldier; somehow, it wasn't hard to guess, after I saw a small feature story in this afternoon's newspaper about a guard out here who thought he saw a ghost come out of the Tomb. The poor fellow's probably in trouble about it, but that can all be straightened out now. Anyway, the description, what there was of it, fitted you. That satisfy your curiosity?"

"No, Anne; that's unimportant. I'm wondering about you. You know what I seem to be—as much as we can know. And yet— Some day this war will be over, and when that happens, what becomes of me? Do I go back there? Even forgetting that, how can I fit into the lives of others? Obviously—"

"*Sh-h.* Don't say it." Her hand was on his shoulder again, gently this time. "You needn't worry about that—it isn't *that* I feel for you, soldier. Once, under other circumstances, perhaps, but now it's only a very deep and genuine friendship and a desire to help—nothing more."

"I'm glad, Anne." He meant it. All the things he'd feared she felt were obviously a part of his former life's possibilities, but none belonged to him now. They had been gone twenty-five years, and he couldn't even miss them now. "I'm glad and relieved. I need friends in this strange new world, but—"

"Let's forget it," she advised, settling back onto a rock. "A smoke together, and then you can walk me home. It's almost dawn already. Wonder how you'll look in your new uniform?"

It was dawn when they reached the bridge this time, almost the double of the dawn into which he had come out. But this time, as he walked quietly along beside the girl, there was no uncertainty, no shuffle. He had work to do, and a friend to explain the puzzles of his new life to him.

And, once again, he had his country. Already, as they neared the end of the bridge and the mist began fading, he could see flags flying here and there in celebration of the Fourth, anniversary of that country's birth. Perhaps it would be more solemn this year than in peace time, perhaps not, but certainly to most people its original meaning would be nearer. To the others who did not care for that meaning, perhaps he was at least a partial answer. He was content, as he walked along beside the girl toward his new work, to know that whatever might be her future or his own, it was a part of the future of America; at the moment, he wanted no more.

THE END.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

SINE PACE

By Edith Borden Greer

Prate me no more the peace of the aged.
They have no peace. Only terror
Lest the dim, flickering spark be extinguished
Before the last bitter dreg is sipped.
Raise a window. Open the door. And they cry:
"A chill would be my death."
A shadow moves in the dark.
They call fearfully, "Who is there?"
Under the lid of the once-prized pastry
Lurks the phantom of death.
Everywhere they are beset with danger.
The kind handclasp, the warm kiss
Are but the carriers of infection.
The water, the food, the very air they breathe
Have become masked enemies.
Their days rap sharply on the door of Time.
They have no peace, only terror.

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